

"THE ABSENT VALUES, THE PALPABLE VOIDS":  
DECONSTRUCTING HENRY JAMES

BY

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Until recently we have lacked the methodology with which to describe our difficulties with the Jamesian oeuvre. Two of the most popular approaches to James, thematic and psychological, ignore the subversive underside of narrative. With the development of structuralism and post-structuralism, however, we now have the concepts to explain why the Jamesian text eludes us.

The questions I canvas are, first, why these texts hide, and, second, how they hide: the devices they use, the textual manifestations of their absence, the particular manner in which each text absents itself. I begin by explaining how a recent shift in certain philosophical thinking has led to our reconceiving our notion of meaning. The shift has been from a tradition of "presence," in which belief in the cogito led to a belief in the unity of the sign, to a philosophy which repudiates the presence of consciousness to itself, and, as a result,



rejects the concept of origin and the transparency of writing. Under the new system of absence, language, a function of différance, constantly defers meaning.

Thus the text eludes efforts to fix its meaning because significance is delayed in verbal play, and, I contend, James's poetics as exemplified in The Art of the Novel, suggest as much. The bulk of the study, however, is devoted to deconstructive analyses of three James novels: The American, The Spoils of Poynton, and The Wings of the Dove. In the first, meaning is, in effect, lost in translation. Because we must question Newman's linguistic prowess, we understand why he cannot threaten the Bellegardes. Meaning, in the form of the completeness of art for Mrs. Gereth and of the fulfillment of love for Fleda Vetch, is deferred in the linguistic play on "point" in the second narrative. In the third, we glimpse the abyss, always the fate of meaning in James, through the eyes of a textual representative, Milly Theale.

Although many scholars of American literature have only grudgingly accepted French critical trends, I believe that by treating James and Derrida intertextually, as participants in a conversation, both speak louder and more clearly.

CHAPTER ONE  
THE MASTER OR THE CHIEF?

I am a bad person, really, to expose "fictitious work" to--I, as a battered producer and "technician" myself, have long inevitably ceased to read with naïveté; I can only read critically, constructively, reconstructively, writing the thing over (if I can swallow it at all), my way, and looking at it, so to speak, from within.<sup>1</sup>

Henry James, Letter to  
Howard Sturgis, 8 November 1903

Henry James dominates the American fictional scene in the same way that God looms over the pre-Edenic abyss in Genesis. Single-handedly, the received view catechizes, James brought forth from the void a fictional poetics codified in his prefaces, novels, letters, sketches, reviews. The Prefaces, especially, became an orthodox primer for generations of readers and writers. For example, Percy Lubbock in his preface to the 1957 edition of The Craft of Fiction (1921) describes James, "the most magisterial" of novelists, as "a large unhurried mind, solitarily working and never ceasing to work, entirely indifferent to the changes and chances of the popular cry."<sup>2</sup> James's manipulation of the indirect "dramatic" method of narration Lubbock sees as particularly praiseworthy. His method is, in fact, the hallmark of his art: "Henry James was the first writer of fiction, I judge, to use all the possibilities of the method with intention and thoroughness, and the full extent of the opportunity which is thus

revealed is very great. The range of method is permanently enlarged."<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to The Art of the Novel (1934), still the only collection of James's New York Edition Prefaces, Richard P. Blackmur lauds James's own analysis and apology for his method, painting James as the wise, benevolent, and most important, moral, father and teacher. Blackmur comments: "we shall probably find as James found again and again, that the things most difficult to master will be the best,"<sup>4</sup> and later,

Being a craftsman and delighting in his craft, he knew also both the sheer moral delight of solving a technical difficulty or securing a complicated effect and the simple, amply attested fact that the difficulties of submitting one's material to a rigidly conceived form were often the only method of representing the material in the strength of its own light.<sup>5</sup>

James satisfies F. R. Leavis, too, primarily though not exclusively because of his profound concern for moral problems. In The Great Tradition (1963) Leavis traces James's moral concerns to Jane Austen and George Eliot: "Having two novelists of that kind of moral pre-occupation in his own language to study he quickly discovered how much, and how little, the French masters had to teach him, and to what tradition he belonged."<sup>6</sup> Despite his dislike for James's later novels ("His technique came to exhibit an unhealthy vitality of undernourishment and etiolation"<sup>7</sup>), Leavis consistently praises James for his "clairvoyant moral intelligence."<sup>8</sup> In an act of supreme adulation, Wayne C. Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) sets the Jamesian "central intelligence" at the top of his hierarchy of possible points of view.<sup>9</sup> Thus glorified and revered, James was established as the

Master of Psychological Realism, and critics of all persuasions flocked to the shrine of the trinity: James the First, James the Second, and James the Old Pretender.<sup>10</sup>

So reads the myth of the Master according to critics from Charles Anderson to Larzer Ziff. According to this received view, James belonged to a Western tradition of realism, devoted to "the serious treatment of everyday reality."<sup>11</sup> The standard bearers of the great realistic tradition, Jane Austen and George Eliot, in addition to continental writers, like Gustave Flaubert, Emile Zola, and Ivan Turgenev, were James's role models, and source study upon source study testifies to their influence on James's productions.<sup>12</sup>

James himself is rather tight-lipped regarding his models despite his undisguised, even effusive admiration for Zola, Flaubert, Balzac, and George Sand in his Notes on Novelists. So undeniable is Jane Austen's influence, however, that it provides both a thesis, for F. R. Leavis, and a joke, for Rudyard Kipling. In Kipling's short story "The Janeites," two soldiers discuss a conversation one overheard between two officers concerning a secret society woman named Jane.

'But, as I was sayin', 'Ammick says what a pity 'twas Jane 'ad died barren. 'I deny that,' says Mosse. 'I maintain she was fruitful in the 'ighest sense o' the word.' An' Mosse knew about such things, too. 'I'm inclined to agree with 'Ammick,' says young Gander. 'Any 'ow, she's left no direct an' lawful prog'ny.' I remember every word they said on account o' what 'appened subsequently. I 'adn't noticed Macklin much, or I'd ha' seen he was bosko absoluto. Then 'e cut in, leanin' over a packin'-case with a face on 'im like a dead mackerel in the dark. 'Pahardon me, gents,'

Macklin says, 'but this is a matter on which I do 'appen to be moderately well-informed. She did leave lawful issue in the shape o' one son; an' 'is name was 'Enery James.'<sup>13</sup>

James's early novels, Roderick Hudson and The American especially, reflect an interest in the "slice of life" local colorism popular in mid-century Western literature. Where James made his greatest contribution, however, was in the field of psychological realism, a mode which may be defined as "an attempt to show what goes on within characters, to present not only thought but emotive, even hallucinatory, states."<sup>14</sup> He developed theories of consciousness, described the form those consciousnesses might effectively take, and then produced those forms in the novels. The style of the later novels, Ruth Yeazell has remarked, can be said to dramatize "the painful struggle of the intelligence literally to come to terms with full consciousness--and thus in some measure to hold it in check."<sup>15</sup>

Two celebrated quarrels helped to establish firmly James's canonical position. The first, a rather cordial one with Walter Besant, was provoked by the lecture Besant delivered at the Royal Institution in April 1884 entitled "The Art of Fiction." In his talk Besant, a best-selling writer of the eighties and nineties, defends the novelists against charges of frivolity by examining his role as teacher. "'The world,' he says, 'has always been taught whatever little morality it possesses by way of story, fable, apologue, parable and allegory.'"<sup>16</sup> His own fictional practice attests to his belief in a pragmatic aesthetic. For example, his novel about the London working classes, Children of Gibeon (1885), contains a speech,

directed at both the working-class crowd within the work and the middle-class reading public, which proposes to establish the Palace of Delight, a sort of community center which would subvert the revolutionary tendencies of the working-class by rechanneling energies.<sup>17</sup> All Sorts and Conditions of Men (1899) preaches trade-unionism. The organizer, Angela Kennedy, has invited a self-described Republican in favor of "root-and-branch reform" to her drawing room, and after a short quadrille, she states her purpose: "You men have long since organized yourselves--it is our turn now; and we look to you for help. We are not going to work any longer for a master: we are not going to work long hours any longer: and we are going to get time every day for fresh air, exercise, and amusement."<sup>18</sup> A third novel, The Alabaster Box (1899), offers as an exemplum a young man who overcomes his cowardice and learns about self-esteem and real friendship when he discovers his own true identity. Thinking himself a gentleman, young Gerald is crushed to learn that his father was the "notorious Rosenberg, the usurer of Golden Square, the man whose name has become a hissing and a proverb," and that the family fortune was ill-got.<sup>19</sup>

The novel itself, Besant believed, was a commodity, a direct instrument of social progress, "a vast engine" of popular influence. We should respect it for the many jobs it performs:

it converts abstract ideas into living models; it gives ideas, it strengthens faith, it preaches a higher morality than is seen in the actual world; it commands the emotions of pity, admiration and terror; it creates and keeps alive the sense of sympathy; it is the universal teacher; it is the only book which the great mass of mankind ever do read; it is the only way in which people can learn what other men and women are like; it redeems their lives from dulness, puts thoughts, desires,



knowledge and even ambitions into their hearts; it teaches them to talk and enriches their speech with epigrams, anecdotes, and illustrations.<sup>20</sup>

The good novel then, according to Besant, preaches a sermon designed to route the reader to heaven. And a responsible reader would not deviate from that path. For example, "a young lady brought up in a quiet country village" would surely "avoid descriptions of garrison life."<sup>21</sup>

James responded with what he termed "simply a plea for liberty,"<sup>22</sup> an essay, likewise titled "The Art of Fiction," published in the September 1884 number of Longman's Magazine and reprinted in Partial Portraits. Ever tactful, James begins by praising Besant's effort saying, "There is something very encouraging in his having put into form certain of his ideas on the mystery of story-telling."<sup>23</sup> What follows, however, is a complete rebuttal of Besant's assumptions and an implicit censure of public expectation in manifesto form. James's most radical pronouncement is that the novel is high art: the novelist is an artist, not an artisan. Since a novel is a work of art, neither novel nor novelist must adhere to arbitrary rules: "Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints."<sup>24</sup> The only responsibility of the novel is that it be interesting. The only reason for its existence, states James, "is that it does attempt to represent life."<sup>25</sup> In that attempt, the novel becomes like life, organic in nature. Explains James: "A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think,

that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts."<sup>26</sup> Thus, character, plot, and other novelistic elements are mutually inseparable, for "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"<sup>27</sup>

James leaves his refutation of what he considers "the most interesting part of Mr. Besant's lecture"--his superficial reference to "the 'conscious moral purpose' of the novel"--until last, for rhetorical emphasis.<sup>28</sup> For it is in this final rebuttal that James sums up his claims for the Art of Fiction:

Vagueness, in such a discussion, is fatal and what is the meaning of your morality and your conscious moral purpose? Will you not define your terms and explain how (a novel being a picture) a picture can be either moral or immoral? You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue: will you not tell us how you would set about it? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair, and will you not let us see how it is that you find it so easy to mix them up?<sup>29</sup>

The essay accomplished what James had hoped it would: "to make our interest in the novel a little more what it had for some time threatened to fail to be--a serious, active, inquiring interest. . . ." <sup>30</sup> Its publication even caused a small stir, eliciting yet another rejoinder, this from Robert Louis Stevenson, published in the December Longman's arguing against James's definition of realism. The essay's tentacles of influence are still visible around the throats of many traditional critics who continue to read "The Art of Fiction" as James's flat, incontrovertible endorsement of Aristotelian mimetic and organic art.



H. G. Wells took some nasty public swipes at James in a 1914 addendum to his novel Boon, thus initiating the second, and not so genial, literary quarrel in which James engaged. The elder writer had befriended, encouraged, and promoted the neophyte, gently criticizing his espousal of a pragmatic purpose in literature. In 1914 the Times Literary Supplement published James's article entitled "The Younger Generation," in which the writer assessed several of his younger colleagues. While he praised the efforts of friends and admirers, like Edith Wharton and Joseph Conrad, he complained that Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells produced disordered, formless novels. Of them James said: "They squeeze out to the utmost the plump and more or less juicy orange of a particular acquainted state and let this affirmation of energy, however directed or undirected, constitute for them 'treatment' of the theme."<sup>31</sup> Forgetting that James had always qualified his praise with private criticism and that even the Times criticism was nonetheless courteous, Wells read the article as a personal attack. He retaliated by adding to Boon, what Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray call "the most esoteric and chaotic of all his works,"<sup>32</sup> a new chapter entitled "Of Art, of Literature, of Mr. Henry James." The chapter, which presents a scathing caricature of James and his work, parodies all the things about James that had irked Wells for seventeen years: his involved manner of speech, his characteristic plot, his obscurity, his personal manner. Taking James's "The Younger Generation" as his point of departure, Wells disparages the Jamesian novel: "It is like a church lit but without a congregation to distract you, with every light and line focused on the high altar. And on the altar, very reverently

placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string. . . ."33

To salt the wound, Wells left a copy of Boon for James at his club. James's response first expresses regret over the now necessary dissolution of their long friendship, and then defends his own practice. "The fine thing about the fictional form to me is that it opens such widely different windows of attention; but that is just why I like the windows so to frame the play and the process!" James concludes.<sup>34</sup> The Master's eloquent defense caused Wells remorse, and he responded by admitting his embarrassment and by trying to mend the friendship. On July 10, 1915, less than a year before he died, James closed the door on Boon and Wells forever: "I am bound to tell you," James wrote, "that I don't think your letter makes out any sort of case for the bad manners of Boon."<sup>35</sup>

What had ended as invective in Boon had begun innocently enough as a friendly disagreement concerning the proper form and function of fictional art. In "The Contemporary Novel" Wells declares the novel "to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas."<sup>36</sup> The destiny of the novelist, suggests Wells, is "to be the most potent of artists, because he is going to present conduct, devise beautiful conduct, discuss conduct, analyse conduct, suggest conduct, illuminate it through and through. He will not teach, but discuss, point out, plead, and display."<sup>37</sup> Wells concludes that the future of the novel lies in answering political,

religious, and social questions. Wells espouses a pragmatic aesthetic, which admits an engagé didacticism, an effort to improve his reading public. James, of course, propounds a modified art for art's sake philosophy, which he defines in his final letter to Wells: "But I have no view of life and literature, I maintain, other than that our form of the latter in especial is admirable exactly by its range and variety, its plasticity and liberality, its fairly living on the sincere and shifting experience of the individual practitioner."<sup>38</sup> He concludes his letter with a firm statement of conviction: "It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process."<sup>39</sup> Wells was able to reduce the disagreement to metaphor, putting it to James thusly: "To you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use."<sup>40</sup>

In a sense, both confrontations were classic, pitting Horace's utile (in the persons of Besant and Wells) against his dulce (in the person of James). James emerged triumphant, the invincible aesthete, the champion of the formal art and artistry of fiction.

Through the years scholarship has focused on James's aesthetic concerns: theme, character, form, and technique. For example, one of the most popular Jamesian themes, the conflict between American and European values, was dealt with as early as 1916 in Rebecca West's Henry James. Critics of the fifties and sixties discussed the theme in depth, and as recently as 1979 yet another study of the topic, The International Fiction of Henry James by Jagdish Narain Sharma, appeared.

Two of the more important works to emerge from the sixties, Dorothea Krook's The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James (1962) and Sallie Sears' Form and Perspective in the Novels of Henry James (1968), dealt extensively with a variety of Jamesian character types. Other critics made their favorite James figures the subjects of literary investigation: Sister Corona Sharp offered a study of several ficelles in The Confidante in Henry James: Evolution and Moral Value of a Fictive Character (1963); Muriel Shine treated the younger generation in The Fictional Children of Henry James (1969); the Jamesian narrator became the subject of many studies including Ora Segal's The Lucid Reflector: The Observer in Henry James's Fiction (1969); and most recently both Mary Doyle Springer and Edward Wagenknecht have published studies of James's women in The Rhetoric of Literary Character: Some Women of Henry James (1978) and Eve and Henry James: Portraits of Women and Girls in his Fiction (1978) respectively. The luminous Jamesian form has also offered the sky for critical seeding beginning with Joseph Warren Beach's pioneering effort The Method of Henry James (1918), running through some of the best work of the sixties, Laurence B. Holland's The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James (1964) and J. A. Ward's The Search for Form: Studies in the Structure of James's Fiction (1967), up to Sergio Perosa's Henry James and the Experimental Novel (1978). Although it is difficult to discuss theme, character, or structure in James without treating technique, some critics have chosen to devote entire studies to examining a single mode. For instance, while their critical assumptions diverge widely, Jean Frantz Blackall (Jamesian Ambiguity and the Sacred Fount, 1965),

Charles Thomas Samuels (The Ambiguity of Henry James, 1971) and Shlomith Rimmon (The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of James, 1977) all consider the element of ambiguity in the Jamesian text. Charles Anderson's study of James's technique, Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels (1977), won the Christian Gauss Award for its treatment of James's practice "of using places and things to symbolize people, so that the fictional characters come to understand each other (or think they do) and are able to establish meaningful relations."<sup>41</sup>

Nearly all this criticism, however, while reflecting diverse interests, has assumed at bottom a mimetic function for the novel. And, as a result, our readings, broad though they may appear, have in fact, a rather narrow range of possibilities. There exists a point at which the case of Kate Croy's culpability in The Wings of the Dove becomes moot. One reason, perhaps, for the circumscribed range is a critical bias for reading the Prefaces as a prescriptive, "fairly exhaustive reference book on the technical aspects of the art of fiction."<sup>42</sup> Critics have tended to swallow whole R. P. Blackmur's categories of Jamesian concern as stated in the Prefaces, general divisions such as "Art and Difficulty," "The Pleas for Attention and Appreciation," and "The Necessity for Amusement." Following Blackmur's lead, they have dangerously announced themselves privy to "the genius and intention of James the novelist."<sup>43</sup> Blackmur states James's novelistic intent as he sees it near the conclusion of his introduction to the The Art of the Novel:

He wanted the truth about the important aspects of life as it was experienced, and he wanted to represent that truth with the greatest possible lucidity, beauty,



and fineness, not abstractly or in mere statement, but vividly, imposing on it the form of the imagination, the acutest relevant sensibility, which felt it. Life itself--the subject of art--was formless and likely to be a waste, with its situations leading to endless bewilderment; while art, the imaginative representation of life, selected, formed, made lucid and intelligent, gave value and meaning to, the contrasts and oppositions and processions of the society that confronted the artist.<sup>44</sup>

Using Blackmur's reading of the Prefaces as a template, critics generated innumerable variations on that mimetic model. For example, Jamesian characters from Roland Mallet to Maisie to Maggie Verver became flesh and blood vessels of consciousness.

Seemingly James had done it, prescribed the right road of fictional practice, and interpretive criticism had demonstrated its validity. If, however, James had truly enunciated the definitive poetics of fiction, why is it that recent fictional practice seems to so thoroughly fly in the face of Jamesian strictures (or scriptures)? One need only look at let alone read Donald Barthelme's "The Glass Mountain," a standard piece in anthologies of contemporary fiction. The "story" consists of one hundred numbered sentences presented in the form of a list--hardly a mimetic picture of reality à la James.<sup>45</sup> Although not entirely amimetic since it does to some extent relate Ambrose's adventures in Ocean City, Maryland, the title story of John Barth's collection Lost in the Funhouse can scarcely be considered to announce organic form in the Jamesian sense. Constructed within shifting time frames, the narrative is interrupted intermittently by theoretical discourse on fictional technique. For example, the fiction opens with the following paragraph:

For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is a place of fear and confusion. He has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday, the occasion of their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America. A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, which in turn is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases as well as the customary type for titles of complete works, not to mention. Italics are also employed, in fiction stories especially, for "outside," intrusive, or artificial voices, such as radio announcements, the texts of telegrams and newspaper articles, et cetera. They should be used sparingly. If passages originally in roman type are italicized by someone repeating them, it's customary to acknowledge the fact. Italics mine.<sup>46</sup>

Even less comprehensible to an English-speaking audience, inculcated with Jamesian theory whether they know it or not, are novels by French writers, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, which appear to reject all notions of plot and character.

Recent examples of fictional narrative, then, apparently invalidate what we have come to understand as the Jamesian poetic. Can James have been wrong? On the other hand, perhaps our reading of James has been distorted by his commentators. James E. Miller believes such is the case. "It is difficult to say how much of this appalling distortion is based on firsthand acquaintance with James and how much on mere perpetuation of earlier rigidified but widely circulated opinions."<sup>47</sup> Miller continues:

Of course James never, in his theory of practice, devoted himself solely to method; and he never insisted that the novelist must create the absolute illusion of reality. But these myths circulate, and even informed critics pass them on as received truth. At their center seems to lie the confused question of the relation, in James's practice and theory, of art and experience, of the novel and life, of fiction and reality.<sup>48</sup>

By reading Jamesian theory within the frame of traditional Western metaphysics, a tradition of presence, those critics have, in effect, closed James's oeuvre to other possibilities. Miller asserts that, in fact, James's "own theory relating fiction and reality was inclusive rather than exclusive and could easily be extended to embrace the contemporary 'new reality' and the 'new novel.'"49 This 1976 essay exemplifies an undercurrent in James's criticism that gathered strength through the seventies. Scholars became less concerned with the traditional scholarly endeavors to establish a copy text, for example, or to identify sources, and more concerned with the broader functions of language, an interest presaged by Laurence Holland's exemplary volume, The Expense of Vision (1964). This changing interest was perhaps a manifestation of changing critical assumptions regarding the nature of language and meaning, assumptions directly affected by new philosophical emphases. A strong tradition in Western thought held sacred the intimate connection between the linguistic sign and meaning, between word and truth, and until recently, literary critics, like Biblical scholars, searched the text for patterns purportedly put there by writers. The philosophical belief that origins and meaning were recoverable occasioned, in the literary realm, traditional exegetical exercises: explication of meaning, location of influences, identification of theme. In the last decade, however, new philosophical propositions concerning the undecidability of textual meaning and the lack of an authoritative origin, have called for a revision of the scholarly enterprise and its underlying assumptions. As we might expect, the



readings that evolve from these new critical hypotheses are radically different from those offered by critics who ascribe to the Western tradition of presence.

By "tradition of presence" I mean the Western metaphysical tradition rooted in Christian-Platonic philosophy and encapsulated in the Cartesian cogito. "I think therefore I am" posits a self present to itself, which takes that knowledge as fundamental proof of existence. Consciousness becomes a self-perception of presence.<sup>50</sup> Upon that consciousness, that immediate presence, philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Husserl construct their ideologies. According to the Western tradition, presence (synonymous with consciousness) is embodied in language. God, for example, becomes the Word, which is not questioned, It being now and forever present. He becomes the original presence from which all other categories are derived. Developing from consciousness, language is considered to be the authentic register of reality, and the written word is thought of simply as the record of the spoken word.<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Culler comments on the implications of the metaphysical tradition for a Derridean definition of language: a metaphysics of presence "longs for a truth behind every sign: a moment of original plenitude when form and meaning were simultaneously present to consciousness and not to be distinguished."<sup>52</sup> Our concept of history, too, is determined by a metaphysics of presence, which sees all temporality, past or future, as the once or to be present. Derrida explains further: "The word 'history' has doubtless always been associated with the linear pattern of the unfolding presence."<sup>53</sup>

Challenging the tradition of presence is a tradition of absence or difference, associated with philosophers, such as Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, interested in the "deconstruction of metaphysics."<sup>54</sup>

Though the opposition is itself problematic (and the occasion of certain internecine differences) absence may be posited as the denial of the primacy of presence.<sup>55</sup> Absence becomes nonconsciousness, once consciousness is recognized as being "generated as one element in a systematic interplay of linguistic elements which is the ground of the mind, rather than the other way around."<sup>56</sup> J. Hillis Miller explains:

The "I" or "me" which seems to prove its own existence in the Cogito may be no more than a grammatical term of a peculiar sort, as Emile Benveniste has suggested recently and as Nietzsche in a somewhat different way had already proposed in 1885. "It is within and by language that man constitutes himself as a subject [comme sujet]," says Benveniste; "because language alone in reality founds, in its reality which is that of being [de l'être], the concept of the 'ego.'" "We used to believe in the 'soul,'" says Nietzsche, "as we believed in grammar and the grammatical subject; we used to say that 'I' was the condition, 'think' the predicate of that conditioned, and thinking an activity for which a subject had to be thought of as its cause. But then we tried, with admirable persistence and guile, to see whether the reverse might not perhaps be true. 'Think' was now the condition, 'I' the thing conditioned, hence 'I' only a synthesis which was created by thinking ['ich' also erst eine Synthese, welche durch das Denken selbst gemacht wird]."<sup>57</sup>

In a metaphysics of absence, then, meaning does not exist autonomously, is not ultimately present; rather, language creates it. As our concept of language changes, so does our concept of history. No longer a continuous unfolding of presence, history, in a tradition of absence, becomes problematic. Derrida chooses to enclose the word with precautionary quotation marks since our very concept of the word includes notions of origin, which he wishes to deny.

The philosophical criticism of presence initiated by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, and more recently argued by Derrida has had predictable implications for literary criticism. A tradition of presence assumes consciousness on the part of the writer and his audience, and the writer's language is understood as a system of natural signs that represent meaningful reality. Consider, for example, M. H. Abrams' classic opening chapter to The Mirror and the Lamp (1953) in which four categories of criticism are identified: the mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective. All four categories, it seems clear, derive from a metaphysics of presence, along with the four coordinates of aesthetic criticism they define.<sup>58</sup> In making the "work" the focus of his model, Abrams fails to recognize the ways in which individual works are necessarily implicated in a network of texts, the prior existence of which is in fact a necessary condition of their existence. In discussing "universe" he further disregards the ways in which external reality is already textualized, thus requiring the author's correction or rearrangement. His explanations of the reader's and the writer's roles also fail to account for a requisite linguistic competence which results from intertextual exposure and enables texts to be written and read. In these ways, all of Abrams' coordinates are blind to recognizing the intervention of already-written linguistic structures, implying that language is the direct transcription or representation of reality, be it idealistically or materialistically conceived. In his review of Abrams' Natural Supernaturalism, J. Hillis Miller identifies the flaw in the model: "his own theory of language is implicitly mimetic.

Language is taken for granted as the straightforward mirror of an interchange between mind and nature, or between mind, nature, and God."<sup>59</sup> Abrams, however, challenges Miller's accusations in the Critical Inquiry forum:

I don't know how I gave Miller the impression that my "theory of language is implicitly mimetic," a "straight-forward mirror" of the reality it reflects, except on the assumption he seems to share with Derrida, and which seems to me obviously mistaken, that all views of language which are not in the deconstructive mode are mimetic views. My view of language, as it happens, is by and large functional and pragmatic: language, whether spoken or written, is the use of a great variety of speech-acts to accomplish a great diversity of human purposes; only one of these many purposes is to assert something about a state of affairs; and such a linguistic assertion does not mirror, but serves to direct attention to selected aspects of that state of affairs.<sup>60</sup>

In defending his theory of language, Abrams proves Miller's point. Language, he feels, does represent some pre-existing meaning. In other words, it presumes and assumes a mimetic function. It leads to presence though is not itself present.

Perhaps the best example of a critical method assuming presence, in its aspects of logos and consciousness, is that developed by what has become known as the Geneva School. J. Hillis Miller traces its roots back from the critics of the Nouvelle Revue Française, to Proust, to mid-nineteenth century critics like Pater and Ruskin and romantic and historical criticism.<sup>61</sup> The Geneva School broadly defines criticism as consciousness of consciousness, literature about literature, and defines literature as a form of consciousness. In at least one of the critics, Albert Béguin, the word "presence" is central.

For our purposes, however, the best example of the Geneva School criticism of consciousness is Georges Poulet who has not only written on James in The Metamorphoses of the Circle but who has himself recently become the object (or subject) of J. Hillis Miller's meta-critical analysis. Poulet's critical strategy involves identifying the particular cogito of each writer he examines. Cogito he defines as "the primary moment of the revelation of the self to itself in 'an act of self-consciousness' separating the mind from everything which may enter it from the outside."<sup>62</sup> Subjectivity, the critical stance, results when the consciousness of the critic coincides with the consciousness of the thinking or feeling person located in the heart of the literary text "in such a way that this double consciousness appears less in its multiplicity of sensuous relations with things, than prior to and separate from any object, as self-consciousness or pure consciousness."<sup>63</sup> Presence, then, is fundamental to Poulet's criticism. As a result, Poulet has a tendency, Hillis Miller notes, to take literary language for granted since he takes as given the authenticity of the words in which a writer registers his experience. "It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for Poulet the language of the works he discusses is seen as a perfectly transparent medium through which the mind of the author passes into the mind of the critic."<sup>64</sup> Because he sees consciousness as the source of literary language, Poulet uses words like "express," "reflect," and "imitated" in stylistic discussions, thus demonstrating that acceptance of the Western literary tradition of mimesis or representation is a necessary corollary to the acceptance of presence or logos.



In his essay on James, Poulet casts the Master as a sort of Geneva School sympathizer, discussing James's conceptions of consciousness, time, form, and character as revealed in the Prefaces, the autobiography, and the reviews. Poulet begins by describing the event of Jamesian self-consciousness:

The moment that Henry James' thought begins to take cognizance of itself and of the world, it recognizes the infinite character of its task. This consists of representing. Now, everything is to be represented. The being who applies himself to reflect the objects of his experience, perceives that nothing is excluded from his experience.<sup>65</sup>

Experience, for James, comprises the totality of consciousness, Poulet explains. Continuing, he offers a Geneva-style explanation of James's sense of time and history:

Far from being, as with Proust, a fortuitous time rarely rediscovered by the working of involuntary memory, the past, with James, is always present and goes on constantly, enlarging itself like a spot of oil in the consciousness; so much so that in the last analysis the great problem for James is not to remember, but quite the contrary, to clear his thought by forgetfulness. But in his consciousness, images of the past come in swarms.<sup>66</sup>

Because of consciousness, James, according to Poulet, defines time as a series of successive presents, and the novel as "a succession of localizations."<sup>67</sup> To ballast his argument, Poulet cites James's metaphor in the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady: "the house of fiction (which) has in short not one window, but a million."<sup>68</sup>

James's notion of a "central" consciousness governs his fictional form as well since a "central" consciousness implies "a kind of circular disposition of the environing world."<sup>69</sup> Poulet compares the mind to a search-light moving in space, projecting its rays outward. The universe,

he explains, radiates concentrically from the central source of light. Within James's works the search-light becomes the central consciousness, the universe the world of the novel. Geneva's understanding of the author's position in that world is evidenced in Poulet's reading of James's place in his novels:

behind the centrality of the principal character, there is still, with Henry James, another centrality, if one can so phrase it, even more withdrawn; that of the author himself. Every central character is for James a means of perceiving things according to the angle of incidence which a creature of his choice gives him. At the back of the consciousness of the character, there is therefore the consciousness of the novelist. It is like the consciousness of a consciousness. Occult, dissimulated into the background, it reigns no less everywhere. It is the center of the center.<sup>70</sup>

Given his "Geneva" associations, Poulet's evaluation of the Jamesian novel does not surprise us. He finds what he is predisposed to find: a subjective novelistic center in which is established "the simplicity of a unique object contemplated by a unique consciousness."<sup>71</sup>

Maurice Blanchot is usually identified with the Geneva critics, such as Georges Poulet, because he shares the view that literature is an act of consciousness. Yet he seems to anticipate the methodological as well as geographical shift in literary theory from Geneva to Paris by introducing the notion of absence into the critical arena. As Sarah N. Lawall notes, "the 'presence' or 'immanent being' that the Geneva critics see in literature is for Blanchot an 'absence,' a formless, characterless 'antipresence' underlying language and literature."<sup>72</sup> This absence results from the nature of language, because to name a thing, to replace an entity with a sign, is to destroy it.

Since language for Blanchot is a system of absences, of nothings, literature paradoxically "rises out of its own ruins."<sup>73</sup> Blanchot's literary theory which posits that reading, in listening to the work, becomes an act of interpretive understanding, is based on the German aesthetic philosophy of Heidegger, Husserl, and especially Hegel, three philosophers who also interest Derrida.<sup>74</sup> But while Derrida deconstructs them, Blanchot imitates them, proceeding by way of a dialectical method, from paradox to resolution.

While the transition from Blanchot to Jacques Derrida seems effortless in a brief survey of this sort, once we arrive on the other side of the Juras, we see the irreconcilability of Poulet and Paris. The Geneva School sees language as reflecting or embodying an immediate presence, as a matter of mimetic representation, but Derrida, Roland Barthes, and J. Hillis Miller, critics who, with important reservations, derive their linguistic theory from Ferdinand de Saussure, see language as a palpable mediation between author and expression, or between work and representation. For these structuralist and post-structuralist or deconstructive critics, language does not transmit meaning as telephones do speech; rather, meaning becomes a process, a sort of chain reaction, whose end never arrives and whose beginning we have lost sight of, but whose path we can trace. As Miller explains, "Meaning arises from the reference of one signifier or phoneme to another, in the interplay of their differences. Meaning in language is always deferred, always in movement away from the present toward the no longer or the not yet."<sup>75</sup> Both structuralists and post-structuralists



agree to the instability of meaning, but most of their similarities stop there. It is difficult, nevertheless, to draw boundaries separating the factions since varying individual stances blur distinctions. As Josué V. Harari observes, "It is too simple and too easy to view the post-structuralist thrust as only an extension of structuralist thinking, or as only anti-structuralist, or as altogether non-structuralist (in its aims), for it is all three."<sup>76</sup> In general, however, structural analysis focuses on the text as a tissue of already-written linguistic signs and attempts to define the grammar, the system, upon which the text is constructed. Post-structuralism likewise borrows terms from linguistics to question language; its aim, however, is not to generate a narrative model. Instead, post-structuralism seeks to undermine the integrity of the sign and thus to decenter the text. Their critical strategies also differ: structuralists describe systems of cultural and textual codes, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity; post-structuralists find in the sedimentation of language entry into the never-ending linguistic labyrinth. Nonetheless, both structuralism and post-structuralism denounce logocentrism and empirical representation as critical dreams.

This critical shift from presence to absence, logos to difference, is exemplified by Roland Barthes in his essay "From Work to Text." "Work" is defined variously as that which can be held in the hand, which closes on a signified, which functions as a general sign. Barthes elaborates:

The work is caught up in a process of filiation. Are postulated: a determination of the work by the world

(by race, then by History), a consecution of works amongst themselves, and a conformity of the work to the author. The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work: literary science therefore teaches respect for the manuscript and the author's declared intentions, while society asserts the legality of the relation of author to work.<sup>77</sup>

In other words, Barthes implies, the work is a demonstration of presence, and the nineteenth-century novel is a fine example. As I have tried to show, the Jamesian novel is almost invariably read as a work: James is the father genius. While he may borrow images, characters, scenes, or phrases from others, they become in his work thoroughly "Jamesian," as the source and analogue studies claim. The text, on the other hand, is held in language, can be approached and experienced, practices the infinite deferment of the signified, is dilatory. The text, rejecting presence, practices difference.

It is easy to see how a criticism devoted to difference is appropriate to a "text" such as a nouveau roman, whose purpose is to subvert and deconstruct the conventions of the realistic novel. But can such a critical strategy be relevant to more traditional writer writers like Henry James and to their products, which are traditionally read as "works"? It is heresy to read the Jamesian novel as text, discovering instead of sources intertexts? Indeed, the apparent difference between "source" and "intertext" is minimal, but the assumptions and implications diverge. If we view Austen and Eliot, Emerson and Hawthorne, as intertexts, our picture of James changes. No longer the father, he becomes the bricoleur, the handyman assembling the "mosaic of citations."<sup>78</sup> And the text becomes an orphan. "Meaning" now exists somewhere in the

play of differences between the language of the intertexts and of James's more immediate one as well as between signifier and signified, and between reader and text.

Under the influence of the nouveau roman, but more important, under the influence of its appropriate poetics, the case of Henry James can be reopened, as I propose to demonstrate. As Ann Jefferson explains apropos of reading Balzac using the nouvelle poétique:

The nouveau roman makes us realise that the revelation of a society is inextricably bound up with the revelation of language. Each depends on the other, so that each can also be read as a metaphor for the other; our view of history is then coloured by our view of the language through which it is constructed, and our view of that language is equally determined by the kind of history which it elaborates. It is in large part thanks to the nouveau roman that this richer, more interesting Balzac has become available to us.<sup>79</sup>

Jonathan Culler, Jefferson's mentor, believes that

It is precisely the traditional work, the work that could not be written today, that may most benefit from criticism, and the criticism which encounters the greatest success is one which attends to its strangeness, awakening in it a drama whose actors are all those assumptions and operations which make the text the work of another period.<sup>80</sup>

The transition from work to text, a movement paralleled by a shift in critical interest from consciousness to textuality, provides a model for changing our reading of Henry James.

Several upstart theoreticians and renegade Jamesians, doubting James the myth, the Aristotelian, the father/author, have already begun to revise (in the sense of re-see as well as re-write) the Jamesian text. Tzvetan Todorov, in a 1969 essay collected in La Poétique de la prose (1971), was the first to apply structuralist methodology to produce new readings of James. "The Jamesian narrative," Todorov

explains,

is always based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause. . . . The absence of the cause or of the truth is present in the text--indeed, it is the text's logical origin and reason for being. The cause is what, by its absence, brings the text into being. The essential is absent, the absence is essential.<sup>81</sup>

To demonstrate his thesis, Todorov reads several James short stories, focusing on "The Figure in the Carpet," which he considers one of James's metaliterary tales. These tales exemplify what Todorov reads as "the fundamental Jamesian precept," which affirms absence and the impossibility of signifying truth. In order to justify his structuralist readings, Todorov concludes his discussion of the Jamesian poetic with a biography:

Henry James was born in 1843 in New York. He lived in Europe after 1875, first in Paris, then in London. After several brief visits to the United States, he became a British citizen and died in Chelsea in 1916. No event characterizes his life; he spent it writing books: some twenty novels, tales, plays, essays. His life, in other words, is perfectly insignificant (like any presence): his work, an essential absence, asserts itself all the more powerfully.<sup>82</sup>

With the publication of Jonathan Culler's Structuralist Poetics (1975) and with the translation in the early seventies of works by French theorists (not to mention the translation of Todorov's collection in 1977), American critics became more comfortable with structuralist and post-structuralist approaches. The years following produced the first book-length structuralist readings of the texts. For example, in The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of James (1977) Shlomith Rimmon describes Jamesian ambiguity applying the cultural codes named by Roland Barthes in S/Z. Sergio Perosa (Henry James and the Experimental Novel, 1978) uses the shift in Western metaphysics as a paradigm to

describe James's middle period: "James's experimental dealings with the novel . . . mark the passage from presence to absence, from the full picture to the total void, from solidity to solution to dissolution, from realism to abstraction."<sup>83</sup> In his conclusion Perosa predicts a massive revision of James scholarship:

In an age of Structuralism, James provides most of the premises and quite a few illustrations of a structural theory of narrative. He is a presence behind or inside much contemporary theorizing, from Todorov to Genette. He provides a solid ground and convincing samples on which to build, test, and exemplify structural theories and practices.<sup>83</sup>

Nicola Bradbury makes camp on that ground in Henry James: The Later Novels (1979). In that study William Veeder notes the "distressing quality of much recent work on James . . . [which substitutes] methodological trendiness for genuine interpretive innovation."<sup>85</sup> Her radicalness, Veeder believes, is only terminological. Indeed, at times Bradbury seems to be juggling with jargon: a tacit understanding between Strether and Maria Gostrey becomes an "unspoken subtext," Osmond's sitting with Madame Merle is a "sign" translated by cultural codes. References to Saussure disguise conservative readings. Of the conclusion to What Maisie Knew Bradbury notes: "In the last part of the novel James shows Maisie achieving a maturity beyond that of any of her companions."<sup>86</sup> Hardly original. When Bradbury does sight something new, however, especially in her discussions of the later novels, she quickly fires and then retreats. For instance, she reads Kate Croy of The Wings of the Dove as a structuralist of sorts who uses the metaphor of language to convey form, citing the line "she hadn't given up yet, and the broken sentence, if she was the last word, would



end with a sort of meaning."<sup>87</sup> In her discussion of The Golden Bowl Bradbury, disappointingly, seems to side against the structuralists, raising a traditionalist objection:

The Golden Bowl abounds in words which draw attention to themselves as language, in phrases which seem to offer comments upon the novel process, in characters who intermediate between [sic] author and reader in relation to their own story; but to extract and interpret these elements as a paranarrative working independently of the rest of the book is to ignore the cohesive impulse toward interpretation within the framework of the whole, and to invent an emasculated structure which is not the novel James offers.<sup>88</sup>

We can see, then, that Henry James: The Later Novels is somewhat uneven methodologically. The study is useful, however, for its close readings (Bradbury's forte is stylistic analysis) and for its attempt at employing new strategies of reading.

Others have used structuralist principles to establish James as an intertext for the American post-modern novel and the nouveau roman despite obvious differences in appearance and technique. Although Sergio Perosa sees the "anti-novel" as practiced by Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Michel Butor as representing the complete subversion of the nineteenth-century (Jamesian) novel, Strother Purdy sees James as its spiritual precursor. Purdy perceives James as having influenced the likes of Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, John Fowles, Arthur Clark, Eugene Ionesco, Gunter Grass, and Jorge Luis Borges in a way that Dickens, Balzac, Kafka, and Proust did not. Purdy claims: "It is that he marked out several areas within the novel that have now become central to it."<sup>89</sup> Those areas provide the divisions of Purdy's book: the tale of supernatural horror, the

novel of disoriented time, the psychological novel of erotic theme, and, most important for our purposes, the matter of nothingness, the assertion of nothing.

John Carlos Rowe has led the charge in revising James scholarship both by using structuralist theory on James and claiming Jamesian influence on the post-modern novel. As early as 1973 he redefined the novel for Jamesians in structuralist terms as "a delimited linguistic world" in which "the tissue of words and signs which constitute the text are the only reality of the work."<sup>90</sup> Meaning, he explains, is disclosed in the free play of those words and signs. Without resorting to jargon, Rowe introduces the reader to the concepts of difference and undecidability:

"If novel dramatizes its essential fictionality, as The Wings of the Dove repeatedly does, then the attempt to determine any final meaning is a violation of the work's aesthetic integrity. It is in the very nature of the novel as a literary form that any governing principle for its structure is absolutely evasive."<sup>91</sup>

Objective presence, he explains, does not inhere in the language of a literary text. Rather, it is the reader who, in an "active engagement of the language of the work and a creative transposition of that language into the forms for his own understanding," makes meaning for himself.<sup>92</sup> To further justify his reading, Rowe points to James's Prefaces:

If the Prefaces express a faith in the central significance of the imagination, it is only in the shapes and forms which it projects that it ever assumes any kind of apprehensible "significance." The potential energy of the creative imagination is a vast fluidity, an infinite chain of associations which must be cut and delimited in the form of the work of art.<sup>93</sup>

In "The Symbolization of Milly Theale" Rowe becomes the first James scholar to cite Jacques Derrida and to apply his notions of absence and the impossibility of any transcendental signified to James's work.

An extensive revision of that essay became Chapter 6 of Rowe's Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness (1976), the first book-length structuralist reading of James. Rowe's bibliography testifies to his critical commitment and reads like the structuralists' social list: Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Geoffrey Hartman, Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Ferdinand de Saussure.<sup>94</sup> In addition to discussing The Wings of the Dove, Rowe includes chapters on The American Scene and The Golden Bowl, in which he offers some of the most enlightening, creative readings to date.

In his most recent contribution to James scholarship, Rowe takes James's part in the critical debate over the form and purpose of fiction, setting up Gerald Graff as the antagonist critical of what he thinks is James's over-refined aestheticism, like Wells and Besant before him. Graff, in Literature Against Itself, cites James for crippling postmodern writing with self-consciousness. Because of his devotion to technique, Graff, claims, James does not allow us to make moral and ethical judgments concerning character and value. The absence of moral meaning in postmodern fiction Graff blames on James. Rowe then names Donald Barthelme, the parodic defender of "aestheticism" against the Graffs (and by implication the Wellses and Besants) of literature, as heir to James's poetics, offering "Presents" to demonstrate his point.



In "Presents," as if poking direct fun at Graff, Barthelme disfigures the distinguished visage of Henry James, in order to remind us all the more emphatically how we have stereotyped James. If we are scandalized by Henry James's appearance in this story in "Iron Boy Overalls," at a pornographic movie, walking between two naked women in British Columbia, then it is our own overly reverent and stereotyped conception of Henry James that has been questioned.<sup>95</sup>

James did not ruin postmodern literature by raping it of value. Rather, by attacking the literary conventions of his day propounded by Wells and Besant, he set the stage for Barthelme's convention busting. As Rowe puts it in his concluding sentence: "We must choose whether we wish to build a monument to memorialize the Master or to ride and whoop in the warparty led by Henry James, Chief."<sup>96</sup>

Veneration or participation are our only real choices. Even repudiation à la Maxwell Geismar is only a version of the former, for both locate meaning and worth (of lack of them) in James's texts. Since worship may require only the repetition of an already too familiar litany, it is for my purposes, not to mention my temperament, unsuitable. If, however, one denies that meaning inheres in words and so in "works," participation is the only option. Else how do we justify the considerable time invested reading James? We paint our faces and whoop alongside the Chief, both of us unprivileged renegades, riding to engage the text and in so doing, tracking meanings of our own.

To read James using a process- rather than a teleologically-oriented criticism is to my mind a more interesting and a more productive proposition for several reasons. First, a participatory, process-geared reading seems more valid in our post-existentialist, nuclear age where external meaning appears illusory. Second, by understanding that meaning

is also deferred in James, his specificity of theme, time, and place, is neutralized and the narrative is made more relevant to the contemporary reader. Moreover, in participating in a reading of a Jamesian text, we are also rewriting it, enlarging its possibility (and its undecidability), in chasing meaning, further deferring it. James himself, as my next chapter examines, was a celebrated revisionist, rereading and and rewriting his works for Scribner's New York Edition and in writing the Prefaces to that edition, rewriting again. Throughout his life, as his notebook entries demonstrate, he was intensely interested in narrative processes: how, why, and what happens when James, Jamesian figures, and we readers engage in our textual activities. Somehow, although all of us apparently expect meaning to be manifest, it inevitably evades us in various ways.

This study attempts to apply recent critical theory to the Jamesian oeuvre in hopes of answering some questions concerning the fate of meaning in James. Until now thematic critics, whose work constitutes the bulk of commentary of James, have assumed that meaning is "there" in the novels, even if camouflaged by the dense texture and the uncolloquial syntax of much of the prose. James's writing only seems to refuse interpretation, they submit. Such assumptions make diligent readers their own worst enemies, for when they are confounded by the seemingly impenetrable surface of a James novel, they give up, accusing themselves of impatience, unpreparedness, or even dim-wittedness. By changing our assumptions concerning meaning, however, we reinstate our access to the Jamesian text. No longer expecting meaning to reveal itself, we accept

responsibility for chasing it through the dense though hardly impentetrable textual labyrinth. What we had once thought to be a flawless, polished surface, we now see is marked by holes and breaches, those textual moments that call the unity of the text, its organic form, into question.

Throughout my ride with James the Chief, I have deployed Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler, J. Hillis Miller, and Jacques Derrida as the avant-garde. Some may argue that the frequent incompatibility of their philosophies undermines my fault-finding mission. Using Derrida, especially, presents a problem since his work is so intertextual, having been appropriated by Miller using Poulet and American accommodations and by Culler via Barthes and American new critical theory. For example, although Miller tries to make Derrida a proponent of absence, Frank Lentricchia notes that "Derrida is not ontologist of le néant because he is no ontologist."<sup>97</sup> Moreover, Derrida, who denounces the systematizing of philosophical to explicate literary text, would denounce Miller's reading of Stevens' poetry as an application of a system.

In the following chapters I pick and choose among the criticisms and the interpretive techniques they afford depending upon the text in question. The theories are, after all, tools, not rules, and I remain uncommitted to all of their final philosophical implications. The critics and I share, however, basic assumptions concerning the ultimate undecidability of meaning, textual sedimentation, free play, and difference. In fact, Derrida himself justified my use, almost freestyle, of contemporary criticism during a recent discussion of the application of deconstruction when he said, "I'm for all marriages."<sup>98</sup>

My hybrid method combining aspects of both structuralist and post-structuralist theory predisposes me to find abysses and gaps underlying the textual fabric of the three James novels I treat. They are indisputably there, however: a meaningless letter in The American, a fire in The Spoils of Poynton, and a literal abyss and the heroine's death in The Wings of the Dove. Meaning is consistently deferred. James's Prefaces, his poetics, insist that reading and writing can do no less. First, then, I will take up the poetics as expressed in The Art of the Novel and then a novel from each of James's periods, early international, middle dramatic, and late mandarin, to demonstrate how the Jamesian text unravels to reveal mises en abyme.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>"To Howard Sturgis," 8 November 1903, The Letters of Henry James, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Scribner's, 1920), I, 429.

<sup>2</sup>Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (1921; rpt. New York: Viking, 1957), p. vii.

<sup>3</sup>Lubbock, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup>Richard P. Blackmur, Introd., The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James (New York: Scribner's, 1934), p. ix.

<sup>5</sup>Blackmur, p. xvi.

<sup>6</sup>F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1963), p. 127.

<sup>7</sup>Leavis, p. 165.

<sup>8</sup>Leavis, p. 157.

<sup>9</sup>Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 153.

<sup>10</sup>Philip Guedalla, "Some Critics," in Supers and Supermen (New York and London: Putnam's, 1924), p. 41. Guedalla's exact words are "The work of Henry James has always seemed divisible by a simple dynastic arrangement into three reigns: James I, James II, and the Old Pretender."

<sup>11</sup>Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), p. 431. James, however, was not a naturalist, an extreme realist dedicated to mirroring empirical reality, to portraying life using a scientific exactness that tended to focus on its seemy, immoral sides. Although he praised Zola's descriptive ability, James thought he lacked taste: "Taste, in its intellectual applications, is the most human faculty we possess, and as the novel may be said to be the most human form of art, it is a poor speculation to put the two things out of conceit of each other. Calling it naturalism will never make it profitable." (See Henry James, "Nana," in Theory of Fiction: Henry James, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. [Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972], p. 134).

<sup>12</sup>The variety of book-length studies examining the influence of continental writing on James includes Cornelia Pulsifer Kelley, The Early Development of Henry James (1930; rpt. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1965); Bruce Lowery, Marcel Proust et Henry James: Une Confrontation (Paris: Plon, 1964); Lyall H. Powers, Henry James and the Naturalist Movement (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1971); Philip Grover, Henry James and the French Novel: A Study in Inspiration (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973); and Dale E. Peterson, The Clement Vision: Poetic Realism in Turgenev and James (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975). Innumerable articles trace James's inspiration to French, English, and Russian novelists, but the award for prodigious and thorough scholarship goes to Adeline Tintner, who has named sources and analogues in over a hundred pieces on James. Her unflagging enthusiasm warranted a separate two-page recognition of her work in a recent bibliographical essay on James. (See Richard A. Hocks and John S. Hardt, "James Studies 1978-79: An Analytic Bibliographical Essay," The Henry James Review, 2, No. 2 [1981], 132-152).

<sup>13</sup>Rudyard Kipling, "The Janeites," in The Best Short Stories of Rudyard Kipling, ed. Randall Jarrell (Garden City, N.Y.: Hanover House, 1961), p. 628.

<sup>14</sup>George J. Becker, Realism in Modern Literature (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1980), p. 115.

<sup>15</sup>Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 18.



<sup>16</sup>Besant cited in John Goode, "The Art of Fiction: Walter Besant and Henry James," in Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, ed. David Howard, John Lucas, and John Goode (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), p. 249.

<sup>17</sup>Goode, p. 248.

<sup>18</sup>Walter Besant, All Sorts and Conditions of Men: An Impossible Story (1899; rpt. St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1971), p. 176.

<sup>19</sup>Walter Besant, The Alabaster Box (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1899), pp. 298-299.

<sup>20</sup>Besant cited in Goode, p. 251.

<sup>21</sup>Besant cited in Goode, p. 256.

<sup>22</sup>Henry James to Robert Louis Stevenson, Dec. 5, 1884, in Henry James Letters, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1980), III, 58.

<sup>23</sup>Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in Partial Portraits (1888; rpt. London and New York: Macmillan, 1905), p. 375.

<sup>24</sup>James, "The Art of Fiction," p. 376.

<sup>25</sup>James, "The Art of Fiction," p. 378.

<sup>26</sup>James, "The Art of Fiction," p. 392.

<sup>27</sup>James, "The Art of Fiction," p. 392.

<sup>28</sup>James, "The Art of Fiction," p. 404.

<sup>29</sup>James, "The Art of Fiction," pp. 404-405.

<sup>30</sup>James, "The Art of Fiction," p. 377.

<sup>31</sup>Henry James, "The Younger Generation," in Henry James and H. G. Wells: A Record of their Friendship, their Debate on the Art of Fiction, and their Quarrel, ed. Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray (1958; rpt. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 182-183. (Hereafter cited as Edel and Ray)

<sup>32</sup>Edel and Ray, *Introd.*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup>H. G. Wells, "Of Art, of Literature, of Mr. Henry James," in Edel and Ray, p. 248.

<sup>34</sup>James to Wells, July 6, 1915, in Edel and Ray, p. 263.

- <sup>35</sup>James to Wells, July 10, 1915, in Edel and Ray, p. 265.
- <sup>36</sup>H. G. Wells, "The Contemporary Novel," in Edel and Ray, p. 154-155.
- <sup>37</sup>Wells, "The Contemporary Novel," in Edel and Ray, p. 154.
- <sup>38</sup>James to Wells, July 10, 1915, in Edel and Ray, p. 266.
- <sup>39</sup>James to Wells, July 10, 1915, in Edel and Ray, p. 267.
- <sup>40</sup>Wells to James, July 8, 1915, in Edel and Ray, p. 264.
- <sup>41</sup>Charles Anderson, Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1977), p. 81.
- <sup>42</sup>Blackmur, p. viii.
- <sup>43</sup>Blackmur, p. xxxi.
- <sup>44</sup>Blackmur, p. xxxviii.
- <sup>45</sup>Donald Barthelme, "The Glass Mountain," in The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction, ed. R. V. Cassill (New York and London: Norton, 1978), pp. 42-46.
- <sup>46</sup>John Barth, "Lost in the Funhouse," in Lost in the Funhouse (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), p. 72.
- <sup>47</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., "Henry James in Reality," Critical Inquiry, 2, No. 3 (1976), 585.
- <sup>48</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., 586.
- <sup>49</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., 604.
- <sup>50</sup>Jacques Derrida, Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), p. 147.
- <sup>51</sup>Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 131-32.
- <sup>52</sup>Culler, p. 19.
- <sup>53</sup>Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), cited in Derrida, Positions, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 56.

<sup>54</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Geneva or Paris? The Recent Work of Georges Poulet," University of Toronto Quarterly, 39, No. 3 (1970), 219-220.

<sup>55</sup>Jacques Derrida, however, renounces the dialectic of presence and absence that I construct as a logical impossibility within a system of difference. "Difference can no longer be understood according to the concept of 'sign,' which has always been taken to mean the representation of a presence and has been constituted in a system (of thought or language) determined on the basis of and in view of presence. In this way we question the authority of presence or its simple symmetrical contrary, absence or lack" (Speech and Phenomena, pp. 138-39). Absence is a contradiction of presence, and Derrida believes the concept of contradiction bound to logocentric metaphysics, to "its speculative, teleological, and eschatological horizon" (Positions, p. 75). He further denies Miller's assertion that consciousness is an effect of language since a system of difference renounces cause-and-effect relationships: "The system is of such a kind that even to designate consciousness as an effect or determination . . . is to continue to operate according to the vocabulary of that very thing to be de-limited" (Speech and Phenomena, p. 147).

Derrida's decoders J. Hillis Miller and Jonathan Culler choose largely to ignore Derrida's entreaties to recognize the manifold ramifications of difference. Their "misreadings" (as Harold Bloom might call them) have led to the development of an American strain of post-structuralism currently popular on American university campuses. Derrida and compagnie become like French grapes transplanted in the Napa Valley or along the Finger Lakes: grown in and crushed on American soil, the fermented product displays surprisingly new character.

<sup>56</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Geneva or Paris," 220.

<sup>57</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Geneva or Paris," 220.

<sup>58</sup>M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (1953; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 3-29.

<sup>59</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Tradition and Difference," rev. of Natural Supernaturalism by M. H. Abrams, Diacritics, 2, No. 4 (Winter 1972), p. 10.

<sup>60</sup>M. H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel," Critical Inquiry, 3, No. 3 (Spring 1977), 427.

<sup>61</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "The Geneva School," in Modern French Criticism: From Proust and Valéry to Structuralism, ed. John K. Simon (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 277.

<sup>62</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "The Geneva School," p. 290.

<sup>63</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Geneva or Paris," 216.

<sup>64</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Geneva or Paris," 219.

<sup>65</sup> Georges Poulet, The Metamorphoses of the Circle, trans. Carley Dawson and Elliott Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1966), p. 307.

<sup>66</sup> Poulet, p. 308.

<sup>67</sup> Poulet, p. 319.

<sup>68</sup> Poulet, p. 319.

<sup>69</sup> Poulet, p. 309.

<sup>70</sup> Poulet, p. 311.

<sup>71</sup> Poulet, p. 319.

<sup>72</sup> Sarah N. Lawall, Critics of Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), p. 221.

<sup>73</sup> Maurice Blanchot, La Part du feu, excerpted in Laurent LeSage, The New French Criticism (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1967), p. 173.

<sup>74</sup> Paul de Man, "Maurice Blanchot," in Modern French Criticism: From Proust and Valéry to Structuralism, ed. John K. Simon (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 260.

<sup>75</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "Geneva or Paris," 220.

<sup>76</sup> Josué V. Harari, "Critical Factions/Critical Fictions," in Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 31.

<sup>77</sup> Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in Image--Music--Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 160.

<sup>78</sup> Bricoleur, as distinguished from engineer, is used by Claude Lévi-Strauss in The Savage Mind (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 16-17, to describe one who engages in the differential play of signifiers. Intertextuality is defined as the mosaic of citations by Julia Kristeva in Semiotikè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 146.

<sup>79</sup> Ann Jefferson, The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), p. 209.

<sup>80</sup> Culler, p. 262.

<sup>81</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 145.

<sup>82</sup> Todorov, p. 178.

<sup>83</sup>Sergio Perosa, Henry James and the Experimental Novel (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), p. 203.

<sup>84</sup>Perosa, p. 204.

<sup>85</sup>William Veeder, rev. of Henry James: The Later Novels and Love and the Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Henry James, Modern Philology, 79, No. 1 (1981), 108-109.

<sup>86</sup>Nicola Bradbury, Henry James: The Later Novels (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), p. 22.

<sup>87</sup>Bradbury, p. 78.

<sup>88</sup>Bradbury, p. 145.

<sup>89</sup>Strother Purdy, The Hole in the Fabric: Science, Contemporary Literature and Henry James (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), p. 12.

<sup>90</sup>John Carlos Rowe, "The Symbolization of Milly Theale," ELH, 40, No. 1 (1973), 134.

<sup>91</sup>Rowe, "The Symbolization of Milly Theale," 134.

<sup>92</sup>Rowe, "The Symbolization of Milly Theale," 135.

<sup>93</sup>Rowe, "The Symbolization of Milly Theale," 135.

<sup>94</sup>John Carlos Rowe, Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 243-250.

<sup>95</sup>John Carlos Rowe, "Who's Henry James? Further Lessons of the Master," The Henry James Review, 2, No. 1 (1980), 8.

<sup>96</sup>Rowe, "Who's Henry James," 11.

<sup>97</sup>Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 171.

<sup>98</sup>Jacques Derrida, in a seminar given at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, April 19, 1982.



## CHAPTER TWO

### "SHAKING OFF ALL SHACKLES OF THEORY UNATTENDED"

This operation can be dragged out in laboriousness and impatience whenever he who, having writ, stops writing, and forces himself to adequately rejoin the fact of his past text so as to unveil its underlying procedure or its fundamental truth. Witness the boredom experienced by Henry James while writing the prefaces to his complete works at the end of his life.<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Derrida, Dissemination

James wrote eighteen Prefaces to accompany the New York Edition, the 24-volume The Novels and Tales of Henry James, issued by Scribner's beginning in 1907 and ending in 1909. The presumed purpose of the Prefaces was to elucidate and summarize the theory of fiction James had offered piecemeal over the years in reviews, essays, notebook entries, letters. Strangely quiet on the specific subject of preface-writing except to announce his ennui as he neared the project's conclusion, James apparently considered the Prefaces part and parcel of the revisionary effort exacted by the new edition. With few exceptions, critics have seized upon the Prefaces as factual accounts of and elegant prescriptions for the Art of Fiction.<sup>2</sup>

The Prefaces should be read neither as formulaic studies of the origins of each text nor as summaries of Jamesian technique, however. The Prefaces fix nothing: on the contrary, in rereading the novels, they add yet another stratum of data and make definitive interpretation impossible. The Prefaces, in fact, more than any other commentary

on James's work, subvert what is commonly understood as the Jamesian poetic of "central consciousness," "solidity of specification," "organic form," and so on. By naming the unoriginal ("original" signaling both freshness of perspective and a quality of the metaphysical concept of origin) character of his own work, James himself sets a precedent for my reading of his novels. By beginning with the Prefaces, we can see how Jamesian method offers parallels with contemporary critical theory, thus opening the novels to a deconstructive reading.

Reinterpretation of the role and status of the preface by critics like Jacques Derrida suggests that a rereading of James's project, one of the most extensive prefatory undertakings in the canon of Western literature, is in order. Derrida has approached the preface as a primary, autonomous structure, neither inside nor outside the text. It is unable either to open or to close the text since the text can have "no stable identity, no stable origin, no stable end."<sup>3</sup> While traditionalists view the post-written preface as a "recuperative gesture of mastery,"<sup>4</sup> the Preface cannot, in fact, perform in such a manner since "each act of reading the 'text' is a preface to the next."<sup>5</sup> A preface, then, even a self-professed one, acts like any other piece of writing does: it is subject to dissemination. Dissemination is, according to Barbara Johnson, "what foils the attempt to progress in an orderly way toward meaning or knowledge, what breaks the circuit of intentions or expectations through some ungovernable excess or loss."<sup>6</sup> To propose, as I do then, that James's Prefaces short-circuit rather than assert intention or cancel rather than set up expectation, is a radical departure from the reading offered by Blackmur and company. That

Derrida's thought on prefacing is applicable to James ought to be suggested by the Maître's reference to the Master, cited as the epigraph to this chapter. Even Derrida, however, seems to short-change James by choosing to comment on his boredom rather than on the texture of the Prefaces, a metaliterary text of great import.

Let us begin by examining more carefully Derrida's understanding of the prefatory project. Near the beginning of his prefatory deconstruction of the preface in/to Dissemination, an essay translated as "Hors Livre: Outwork, Hors d'oeuvre, Extratext, Foreplay, Bookend, Facing, Prefacing," Derrida offers a definition to introduce the problem of the post-written preface:

A preface would retrace and presage here a general theory and practice of deconstruction, that strategy without which the possibility of a critique could exist only in fragmentary, empiricist surges that amount in effect to a non-equivocal confirmation of metaphysics. The preface would announce in the future tense ("this is what you are going to read") the conceptual content or significance (here, that strange strategy without finality, the debility or failure that organizes the telos or the eschaton, which reinscribes restricted economy within general economy) of what will already have been written. And thus sufficiently read to be gathered up in its semantic tenor and proposed in advance. From the viewpoint of the fore-word, which recreates an intention-to-say after the fact, the text exists as something written--a past--which, under the false appearance of a present, a hidden omnipotent author (in full mastery of his product) is presenting to the reader as his future. Here is what I wrote, then read, and what I am writing that you are going to read. After which you will again be able to take possession of this preface which in sum you have not yet begun to read, even though, once having read it, you will already have anticipated everything that follows and thus you might just as well dispense with reading the rest. The pre of the preface makes the future present, represents it, draws it closer, breathes it in, and in going ahead of it puts it ahead. The pre reduces the future to the form of manifest presence.<sup>7</sup>

Given his definition, ("an essential and ludicrous operation"; caught in a system of difference), the preface is self-subverting because, as writing, it belongs to none of these time frames, present, past, or future, since they are all modified presents. Moreover, because the operation of the preface would "confine itself to the discursive effects of an intention to mean" and point out "a single thematic nucleus or a single guiding thesis," the preface would negate the textual displacement at work within it.<sup>8</sup> Yet, its disseminating character renders the preface resistant to reducing a text to its effects of meaning, content, thesis, or theme.

The structure of a preface is not that of "a table, a code, an annotated summary of prominent signifieds, or an index of key words or of proper names."<sup>9</sup> Derrida presents instead the metaphor of the magic slate, a child's writing toy composed of a dark, waxed surface covered first by a thin, light-colored opaque sheet and then by a transparent piece of cellophane. When the child writes on the cellophane, the opaque layer registers the image; however, when the two layers are separated from the wax, the image disappears on the opaque layer but is retained in the underlying wax surface. Derrida deconstructs his metaphor:

Prefaces, along with forewords, introductions, preludes, preliminaries, preambles, prologues, and prolegomena, have always been written, it seems, in view of their own self-effacement. Upon reaching the end of the pre- (which presents and precedes, or rather forestalls, the presentative production, and, in order to put before the reader's eyes what is not yet visible, is obliged to speak, predict, and predicate), the route which has been covered must cancel itself out. But this subtraction leaves a mark of erasure, a remainder which is added to the subsequent text

and which cannot be completely summed up within it. Such an operation thus appears contradictory, and the same is true of the interest one takes in it.<sup>10</sup>

The preface is the "residue of writing," which "remains anterior and exterior to the development of the content it announces. Preceding what ought to be able to present itself on its own, the preface falls like an empty husk, a piece of formal refuse, a moment of dryness or loquacity, sometimes both at once."<sup>11</sup> Neither inside nor outside, the preface is a supplementary third term whose status is called into question. What is the status of

This term that is never sublated by the dialectical method without leaving a remainder? That is neither a pure form, completely empty, since it announces the path and the semantic production of the concept, nor a content, a moment of meaning since it remains external to the logos of which it indefinitely feeds the critique, if only through the gap between ratiocination and rationality, between empirical history and conceptual history? If one sets out from the oppositions form/content, signifier/signified, sensible/intelligible, one cannot comprehend the writing of a preface.<sup>12</sup>

That is precisely Hegel's problem as Derrida sees it. Teleologically motivated to make of the preface a postface, Hegel remains mired in formalist, logocentric metaphysics, "as close and as foreign as possible to a 'modern' conception of the text or of writing."<sup>13</sup> Derrida comments:

Absolute knowledge is present at the zero point of the philosophical exposition. Its teleology has determined the preface as a postface, the last chapter of the Phenomenology of Spirit as a foreword, the Logic as an Introduction to the Phenomenology of Spirit. This point of ontoteleological fusion reduces both precipitation and after-effect to mere appearances or to sublatable negativities.<sup>14</sup>

The preface, the semantic after-effect, Derrida explains,



cannot be turned back into a teleological anticipation and into the soothing order of the future perfect [that tense in which prefaces are normally written]; the gap between the empty "form," and the fullness of "meaning" is structurally irremediable, and any formalism, as well as any thematicism, will be impotent to dominate that structure.<sup>15</sup>

The process of dissemination interrupts the cycle that reads the preface, an after-effect of meaning, as origin.

Dissemination is a differential decentering, delimitation, and re-inscription of binary logic: it subverts intentions of unity. In her introduction to Derrida's Of Grammatology, Gayatri Spivak defines dissemination as a version of textuality:

A sewing that does not produce plants, but is simply infinitely repeated. A semination that is not insemination but dissemination, seed spilled in vain, an emission that cannot return to its origin in the father. Not an exact and controlled polysemy, but a proliferation of always different, always postponed meanings.<sup>16</sup>

According to Derrida, a preface is a disseminating operation. Due to dissemination, the preface

becomes necessary and structurally interminable, it can no longer be described in terms of a speculative dialectic: it is no longer merely an empty form, a vacant significance, the pure empiricity of the non-concept, but a completely other structure, a more powerful one, capable of accounting for effects of meaning, experience, concept, and reality, reinscribing them without this operation's being the inclusion of any ideal "begreifen."<sup>17</sup>

The preface is finally an other text and an assisting discourse, the double of what it exceeds. Derrida remarks:

According to the logic of sublation, the postface provides the truth both of the preface (always stated after the fact) and of the entire discourse (produced out of absolute knowledge). The simulacrum of a postface would therefore consist of feigning the final revelation of the meaning or functioning of a given stretch of language.<sup>18</sup>

Producing the simulacrum of the postface, the preface, can be a thankless task, Derrida suggests:

This operation can be dragged out in laboriousness and impatience whenever he who having writ, stops writing, and forces himself to adequately rejoin the fact of his past text so as to unveil its underlying procedure or its fundamental truth. Witness the boredom experienced by Henry James while writing the prefaces to his complete works at the end of his life.<sup>19</sup>

After citing Théophile Gautier and Gustave Flaubert on the irritation of preface writing, Derrida continues:

But the simulacrum can also be play-acted: while pretending to turn around and look backward, one is also in fact starting over again, adding an extra text, complicating the scene, opening up within the labyrinth, a supplementary digression, which is also a false mirror that pushes the labyrinth's infinity back forever in mimed--that is, endless--speculation. It is the textual restance of an operation, which can be neither opposed nor reduced to the so-called "principal" body of a book, to the supposed referent of the postface, nor even to its own semantic tenor. Dissemination would propose a certain theory--to be followed, also, as a marching order quite ancient in its form--of digression. . . .<sup>20</sup>

The distinction between the "real" and the "play-acted" simulacrum is not completely clear since the writing of the first necessitates the action of the second. In his dissemination of prefaces, Derrida rushes past James much too quickly. Although preface-writing may well have led James to ennui, Derrida does not give him enough play. Stiff though the Prefaces may seem, there is play yet in the joints that Derrida does not consider. If we play with the problem of the preface (and thus play into Derrida's hands), we too can start over, alert, as we have become, to the many manifestations of play within the prefatory labyrinth.

Given Derrida's analysis of the subversive, problematic nature of prefatory play, Richard P. Blackmur's formal, empirical reading of James becomes suspect. In his introduction to The Art of Fiction, Blackmur describes the formal components of a typical James Preface. The paradigmatic Preface, Blackmur suggests, contains five elements: a section of autobiography illuminating the conditions under which the fictional text was composed; a statement of anecdote relating the evolution of the story's "germ"; the distinguishing features of the germ; the evolution of the germ; and a technical exposition of the narrative.<sup>21</sup> In James's prefatory remarks Blackmur finds a demonstration of an artist's consciousness, a dedication to empirical representation. Most critics subscribe to Blackmur's readings.

In his essay "Henry James in Reality," James E. Miller, Jr. disagrees, however, presenting a persuasive case for revising Jamesian poetics. The James revealed in the theory, he argues, is not at all the stiff prescriptivist. Instead, he is "one of the most ingeniously flexible of fictional theorists"; like Whitman, he contains multitudes.<sup>22</sup> Miller attributes our cartoon fat-headed James to wrong-headed critics who have for one reason or another perpetrated lies. James's theory itself seems to warn against the logical fallacy of card-stacking, that is, choosing only the details from the Prefaces that reinforce preconceptions, because, again like Whitman, James contradicts himself. As Miller notes in his earlier Theory of Fiction: Henry James, James believed both that a moral sense was primary to reading and interpretation, and that a moral sense was unnecessary: that intellectual, logical, and analytical capacities were what counted.<sup>23</sup> In "The Future of

the Novel" James asserts the freedom accruing to both novel and novelist: the novel "moves in a luxurious independence of rules and restrictions. Think as we may, there is nothing we can mention as a consideration outside itself with which it must square, nothing we can name as one of its peculiar obligations or interdictions."<sup>24</sup> The flexibility provided for in Jamesian poetics and James's own recognition of the complexity of using language cast needed light on the myth of Jamesian method, Miller believes.

Ann Jefferson has also taken exception to the largely Aristotelian interpretation of James's theoretical discourse, whereby James becomes the champion of "consciousness" and "form." While she admits to James's concern with finding appropriate narrators for his fictions, she claims that the Prefaces do not suggest pat answers. "For James himself his narrative strategies did not constitute a set of dogmatic proposals concerning the realism of his fiction."<sup>25</sup> Jefferson then compares James to André Gide, a great admirer of James and a novelistic innovator in his own right. Gide, too, proposed a narrative strategy of presenting his audience with a reflector: "'An angry man tells a story; there is the subject of a book. A man telling a story is not enough; it must be an angry man, and there must be a constant connection between his anger and the story he tells.'"<sup>26</sup> Jefferson's purpose in drawing the parallel is to demonstrate that both writers use the narrative tactic for formal efficiency rather than for increased "realism." "Neither James nor Gide," she concludes, "was responsible for what Wayne Booth has since called the 'general rules' of modern fiction for which they are both seen as providing textbook examples."<sup>27</sup>

Along with Derrida's exemplary questioning of the preface, both Miller and Jefferson set a precedent by challenging the Blackmurian Preface readers. By raising inconsistencies in the theoretical discourse itself and thus poking holes in the received view, they encourage further reevaluation of James's theory. We will follow their cues by examining the Prefaces as a descriptive rather than a prescriptive narrative, whose threads include extended discussions of language, text, (in general and, collapsing Barthes' distinction, more specifically the novelistic genre), and the roles of writer and reader.

In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" Derrida discusses the impossibility of totalization in a system of difference:

If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field--that is, language and a finite language--excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions.<sup>28</sup>

His field or universe of infinite substitution is language, as it is for other post-structuralists. Since language is the writer's donnée, we must not, as James declares in "The Art of Fiction," deny him it.<sup>29</sup> This language does not become intelligible via a simple one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified, with signifier understood as the one-way ticket to ultimate meaning, consciousness, or presence, depending on the preferred vocabulary. Language itself is primary, producing meaning through its differential relationship with other words.



Such is the basic definition of difference attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure and his proponents. Derrida, however, rejects Saussure's definition which derives from Cartesian metaphysics, from the binary opposition he cites between langue and parole, an opposition between origin and manifestation that Derrida would not recognize. Insisting, instead, that this difference is neither word nor concept but juncture of forces, Derrida chooses to spell the form "différance" with an a to emphasize the simultaneous properties of differing and deferring.<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes uses the concept to define, in part, what he sees to be the post-structuralist project: "to postulate that each text, in other words, must be treated in its difference, 'difference' being understood here precisely in a Nietzschean or a Derridean sense. . . . the text . . . is not the parole of a narrative langue."<sup>31</sup>

James seems to anticipate post-structuralist notions of the linguistic field in remarks he makes in his theoretical discourse. Acknowledging the donnée and assessing the field, James notes in a letter to Hugh Walpole: "Form alone takes, and holds and preserves, substance--saves it from the welter of helpless verbiage that we swim in as in a sea of tasteless tepid pudding."<sup>32</sup> Although James's conscious intent is to ridicule writers of "large loose baggy monsters," the producers of "the perfect paradise of the loose end,"<sup>33</sup> his language betrays a deeper insight. Very early in his career he had written "All writing is narration." Conversely, all narration, speech, story-telling, is writing, language, helpless verbiage, and form is arbitrarily imposed. James's clear recognition of his field suggests an understanding of the differential production of meaning, which is, in

fact, demonstrated throughout the Prefaces and the novels. For example, in the Preface to Roderick Hudson, James says: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so."<sup>34</sup> The novel that follows that Preface dramatizes the fate of the artist who cannot plot effectively his circle. Roderick, a young American sculptor given by nature to extravagance, goes to Europe to develop his talent, but instead of working in his studio, he spends his patron's money on debauchery. When he meets the equally extravagant femme-fatale Christina Light, his fate is sealed. Roderick either falls or jumps to his death from an Alpine cliff, lured by the freedom of the abyss, as Derrida's translator says, "intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom."<sup>35</sup>

Recognizing that differance is unarrestable, the writer must force closure and arbitrarily stop the deferment at a chosen point or points. A passage in the Preface to The Awkward Age describing the evolution of the project of that novel hints at that knowledge:

I remember that in sketching my project for the conductors of the periodical I have named I drew on a sheet of paper--and possibly with an effect of the cabalistic, it now comes over me, that even anxious amplification may have but vainly attenuated--the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance around a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects. I had divided it, didn't they see? into aspects--uncanny as the little term might sound (though not for a moment did I suggest we should use it for the public), and by that sign we would conquer.<sup>36</sup>

The plan is the James prototype. The central object is that situation, the Jamesian unstable consciousness constituted (in the metaphysics of difference) by language. The small distinct lamps surround the situation lighting one of its aspects. James himself notes the uncanny use of that term, suggesting its inappropriateness as general linguistic currency. A close consideration reveals his point: the word "aspect" carries with it notions of "mental looking," raising questions of consciousness, which, in James, are always filtered through language. Another major meaning of the word, moreover, regards appearance: of expression, object, circumstance, especially to the consciousness. While James appears to be describing a method for representing lighted reality, truth, he is really insisting on its (and his own) artificiality and its impossibility by his purposeful use of the word "aspect," which decenters that apparently clear meaning. The sketch he draws for his publishers should appear cabalistic, for indeed it is "intriguing": both eliciting fascination and involved in secret entanglements.

Such a strategy makes for a text of seamless surface covering an abyss of ambiguity. Throughout the Prefaces James refers to those consequences of working with language. For instance, in his Preface to The American, he writes: "Nothing here is in truth 'offered'--everything is evaded, and the effect of this, I recognise, is of the oddest."<sup>37</sup> In noting that "everything," which I take to mean "meaning," is always, evaded, in other words deferred, James insists on the differential production of meaning. In his Preface to The Princess Casamassima James further suggests his subversive approach to definitive meaning. That novel presents Hyacinth Robinson, the central consciousness, involved

in a revolutionary plot. James comments: "He listens anxiously to the charge--nothing can exceed his own solicitude for an economy of interest; but feels himself all in presence of an abyss of ambiguities."<sup>38</sup> Hyacinth, a consciousness, a bookbinder, a purveyor of revolutionary rhetoric, given his linguistic being, can do nothing less. The text concerns his experience, which James defines as "our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures--an intelligent report of which has to be based on that apprehension."<sup>39</sup> As a report, experience is language, subject to difference. The surface story is all most readers recognize. The discourse of a James novel, however, though essential, is almost always ignored. James remarks in the Preface to The Princess Casamassima: "Possible stories, presentable figures, rise from the thick jungle as the observer moves, fluttering up like startled game, and before he knows it indeed he has fairly to guard himself against the brush of importunate wings. He goes on as with his head in a cloud of humming presences."<sup>40</sup> Hyacinth, James continues, sprang from the pavement--the universe of language from which consciousness springs. In other Prefaces James relates similar stories: The Spoils of Poynton glimmered before him in the space of ten words;<sup>41</sup> "Pandora" developed from "one of the scantiest of memoranda, twenty words jotted down in New York."<sup>42</sup> In these few words lurked "the stray suggestion, the wandering word, the vague echo,"<sup>43</sup> the germ opening into the linguistic field. Following the pattern of other novels, Poynton, James explains, grew from "a single small seed, a seed as minute and wind-blown . . . dropped unwittingly by my neighbour, a mere floating particle in the stream of talk."<sup>44</sup> Likewise, The Ambassadors sprang straight from a dropped grain of suggestion.<sup>45</sup>

"Seed" is a crucial term here, suggesting, as several critics have noted, James's romantic intertexts. To support their Coleridgean notions of Jamesian form, they further light on a passage in the Preface to The Tragic Muse where James confesses his delight "in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form."<sup>46</sup> James's references to germs and seeds, however, can also be read as anticipating post-structuralist commentary on the disseminating nature of textuality and of meaning itself. Seed can be planted, for example, in a garden, according to a plan, or it can be the result of a plant "gone to seed,"--like the seed of The Spoils of Poynton--ripe for dissemination by the wind.

Derrida, too, treats the organic image of the seed or germ, most thoroughly in Dissemination. First, there was retrospectively postulated "'primitive' mythical unity," he explains. As a result of the shot/throw/blow [le coup] destroying unity, the seed is parted and projected, inscribing difference in the heart of life.<sup>47</sup> From that time, "no thing is complete in itself, and it can only be completed by what it lacks."<sup>48</sup> Derrida continues by employing characteristic sexual and agricultural images:

Germination, dissemination. There is no first insemination. The semen is already swarming. The "primal" insemination is dissemination. A trace, a graft whose traces have been lost. Whether in the case of what is called "language" (discourse, text, etc.) or in the case of some "real" seed-sowing, each term is indeed a germ, and each germ a term. The term, the atomic element, engenders by division, grafting, proliferation. It is a seed and not an absolute term. But each germ is its own term, finds its term not outside itself but within itself as its own internal limit, making an angle with its own death.<sup>49</sup>



What this all means, if indeed, as Derrida says, it were intended to mean something, is that nothing exists prior to division: "no simple originary unit prior to this division through which life comes to see itself and the seed is multiplied from the start; nothing comes before the addition in which the seed begins by taking itself away. . . ." <sup>50</sup> Later in the essay, Derrida comments on his own attending discourse on Phillipe Sollers' Numbers and on attending discourse in general. The narrative voice in such discourse, like James's Prefaces, is an "I" "that is both part of the spectacle and part of the audience." It functions as a "pure passageway for operations of substitution. . . . A term and a germ, a term that disseminates itself, a germ that carries its own term within it. Strengthening its breath with its death. The seed is sealed; the sperm, firm." <sup>51</sup> Returning yet again to the prefatory problematic, we can conclude that the preface is a sort of proto-seed, semen "just as likely to be left out, to well up and get lost as a seminal difference, as it is to be reappropriated into the sublimity of the father." Lost in seminal differentiation/dissemination, the word of the father "assisting and admiring his work," loses its breath. <sup>52</sup>

Read in a deconstructive light, James's many "organic" references to germs, seeds, and grains also problematize the notion of fatherhood and of James as the inseminator, since James's prefatory seeds (both those named in the Prefaces and those provided by the Prefaces themselves) disseminate, subverting the organic plan and denying him as origin of the seed. The term/germ, "strengthening its breath with its death," effaces itself in the Jamesian novel becoming a mere trace. As James comments in his Preface to The Spoils of Poynton:

If life, presenting us the germ, and left merely to herself in such a business, gives the case away, almost always, before we can stop her, what are the signs for our guidance, what the primary laws for a saving selection, how do we know when and where to intervene, where do we place the beginnings of the wrong or the right deviation? Such would be the elements of an enquiry upon which, I hasten to say, it is quite forbidden me here to embark.<sup>53</sup>

Answers to the inquiry are unlocatable within the labyrinth, recoverable only within a fixed, centered system. If James could provide them, he would be, as many have read him, the Aristotle of a fictional (not dramatic) poetics. James, however, admits: "The answer may be after all that mysteries here elude us, that general considerations fail or mislead, and that even the fondest of artists need ask no wider range than the logic of the particular case."<sup>54</sup> The signs, along with the germs, are disseminated, leading nowhere. This deconstructive reading of James's use of his germs also alters "historical" Henry James: once we recognize his own renouncement of creation *ex nihilo*, we must credit him with more modesty than we had previously. Although he does not use jargon like "déjà-écrit," he points repeatedly to the already-written character of his novelistic ideas.

As the already-written, disseminating germ grows into a text, it passes through the author's consciousness and is further diffused in the flow of language. James recognizes in the Preface to The Lesson of the Master: "We can surely account for nothing in the novelist's work that has n't passed through the crucible of the imagination, has n't, in that perpetually simmering cauldron his intellectual pot-au-feu been reduced to savoury fusion."<sup>55</sup> The consciousness, the imagination, of both James and his characters, is the traditional center of the Jamesian poetic,

the center that inevitably becomes decentered in deconstructive criticism. Critics like Richard P. Blackmur, ascribing to the metaphysics of presence, see the writer as an inviolable consciousness, his intelligence as generating language and art. A system of difference, however, rereads the writer's consciousness as a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of difference.<sup>56</sup> Paul de Man comments:

The trend in Continental criticism . . . represents a methodologically motivated attack on the notion that a literary or poetic consciousness is in any way a privileged consciousness, whose use of language can pretend to escape, to some degree, from the duplicity, the confusion, the untruth that we take for granted in the everyday use of language.<sup>57</sup>

Not only is the literary consciousness not privileged, it is nonexistent without the text. As Michel Foucault states in "What is an Author?":

the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. (When a historically given function is represented in a figure that inverts it, one has an ideological production.) The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, recent literary theory redefines the cogito, the motto of logocentric metaphysics, as a function of discourse rather than the other way around. "The self is a linguistic construction,"

J. Hillis Miller explains, "rather than being the given, the rock, a solid point de départ."<sup>59</sup>

James seems to reflect a system of differance and the position of de Man, Foucault, and Miller regarding the writer and his place in the text. Indeed, James seems to anticipate Foucault's description of the author as "a certain functional principle by which . . . one limits, excludes, and chooses" with his metaphor of the novelist as window. For a window is in fact a functional principle of any house: it can be opened or closed to limit or exclude snow and rain. A favorite figure, the window appears in James's critical discourse more often than the one occasion everyone remembers--in the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady where the house of fiction is said to have a million. For example, in an 1890 letter to W. D. Howells, James writes: "The novelist is a particular window, absolutely--and of worth in so far as he is one."<sup>60</sup> Again the metaphor appears in a 1905 essay on Balzac: "we thus walk with him in the great glazed gallery of his thought; the long, lighted and pictured ambulatory where the endless series of windows, on one side, hangs over his revolutionized . . . garden of France. . . ."<sup>61</sup> Even the most perceptive critics use such citations to ballast traditional discussions of Jamesian point of view. For example, James E. Miller, Jr. says of James:

The novelist never really looked on "reality bare," but always through the frame created by his unique consciousness--that consciousness shaped by the stored impressions, in process of transfiguration, in their obscure catalytic relations with each other, by the imagination. Moreover, the consciousness places boundaries on reality, like a window frame. To "look on reality bare" would be merely to surrender to its meaningless flux and patternless chaos. To look at reality through the frame of one's

consciousness is to frame reality with an individual (unique) point of view--the ultimate source of all interest in fiction.<sup>62</sup>

A window, these critics claim, suggests an ordered, limited perspective, a circumscription of the reader's view by the writer. On the contrary, we recall that the window is a function of the house: without the house, the window is meaningless. The house defines the window. Further, the window, lest we forget, is composed of two major parts, the glass pane and the frame. The glass is transparent: we can believe it does not exist, as those who have walked into plate windows will testify. A clear window limits the reader's view not in the slightest: it brings the outside in and vice-versa, nullifying the boundary between them, recalling the inside/outside problematic of the preface discussed by Derrida in "Hors livre."

What limits James's window, any window, is a frame, in Derrida's terms, a parergon. In his essay "The Parergon," Derrida cites Immanuel Kant's definition of the frame as stated in the Critique of Judgment:

"Even what is called ornamentation [Zierathen: decoration, ornamentation, adornment] (parerga), i.e. what is only an adjunct, and not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation of an object, in augmenting the delight of taste does so solely by means of its form. Thus it is with the frame [Einfassungen] of pictures or the drapery on statues or the colonnades of palaces."<sup>63</sup>

After citing Kant, Derrida offers his own definition: "A parergon is against, beside, and above the ergon, the work accomplished, the accomplishment of the work. But it is not incidental; it is connected to and cooperates in its operation from the outside."<sup>64</sup> It attains, he concludes, the status of a philosophical concept, designating "a general formal predicative structure which may be carried over, either



intact or consistently deformed, reformed, to other fields, where new contents may be submitted to it."<sup>65</sup> "The Parergon inscribes something extra, exterior to the specific field."<sup>66</sup> In his discussion Derrida illustrates his position(s) using the drapery on Greek statues and the columns supporting buildings as parergonal examples. In each case the parergon violently separates the work from the "other"; however, in wrenching the two, the parergon becomes self-effacing. Derrida explains:

The parergon is distinguished from both the ergon (the work) and the milieu; it is distinguished as a figure against a ground. But it is not distinguished in the same way as the work, which is also distinguished from a ground. The parergonal frame is distinguished from two grounds, but in relation to each of these, it disappears into the other. In relation to the work, which may function as its ground, it disappears into the wall and then, by degrees, into the general context. In relation to the general context, it disappears into the work. Always a form on a ground, the parergon is nevertheless a form which has traditionally been determined not by distinguishing itself, but by disappearing, sinking in, obliterating itself, dissolving just as it expends its greatest energy. The frame is never a ground in the way the context or the work may be, but neither does its marginal thickness form a figure.<sup>67</sup>

In such a way, we can understand James's intertexts as his parerga, his frames invisibly mediating between the window and the house: James and his fiction. Each intertext of the house of fiction, be it Eliot or Emerson, sits against, beside, and above James, the transparent window, the ergon. From that rather ambiguous position, the intertexts are connected and operate on both James and his texts, for it is not clear whether the frame properly "belongs" to the architectural structure or to the glass window. Indeed, the intertexts function as a frame, "the general formal predictative structure," which is consistently deformed and reformed depending on the window. In so functioning, they disappear, as Derrida says, "into the wall and then, by degrees, into the general

context." James is the window, his intertexts the parerga, his frames. To say then that the house of fiction has a million windows is not to assert 1000 x 1000 points of view; rather, it is to admit to intertextuality and to the transparency of the writer's language.

By virtue of a metonymic slide from window/frame and author/intertext, the text/preface problematic is put in perspective. The Preface, in the New York Edition, before Blackmur's reassembling of them, is a parergon framing the text, dividing the text from the outside. Obviously extrinsic, the parergonal Preface nonetheless disappears into the textual fabric. "Hors livre" yet "dans livre," preface yet postface, the James Preface gives entry to the linguistic labyrinth, creates aporia--an ultimate, dead-end undecidability. As parergon, it "warps as it works,"<sup>68</sup> "warp" meaning not only to twist or distort, but also, in the weaving of textiles, to arrange. Given the ambiguous nature of the preface, the arrangement created by it is, as Derrida comments, fragile. The fragile, tenuous character of the Prefaces as we now understand them subverts the reading received via Blackmur, supports some of James Miller's efforts, and encourages continued revision.

As we slide backwards for a moment on the metonymic axis, from the text/preface relationship to that between the author and the intertext, James himself is redefined. As the frame limits a window and the prefatory parergon artificially arranges, imposes "restraints upon a discourse which continuously threatens to exceed its boundaries," the intertexts--both the precursor texts and the critical readings of the text itself--define, in a fundamental way, the author. They write him. As once critic demonstrated, to know "Shakespeare" is not only

impossible but useless. We can only know Shakespeare as he was read/written by progressive centuries. Likewise, James is read and written by each generation, and academics who claim that a historical "James" exists should revise their assumptions to suggest that it is instead their reading that creates that James.

Confessing himself as "written" rather than as "writer," James heralds contemporary critical theory. For example, in the Preface to The Tragic Muse, he says that the writer's romance is the romance he himself projects, thus describing himself in textual terms. Reinforcing this suggestion, he repudiates custody of his fiction in a later comment: "I can but look on the present fiction as a poor fatherless and motherless, a sort of unregistered and unacknowledged birth."<sup>69</sup> Given his denial of parenthood, any Henry James we would know via that text would be a writer we and the intertexts collaborated on to produce. James's suggestion of his text's orphaned state recalls Barthes's concept of the fatherless text in "The Death of the Author," a concept challenged on small points yet upheld on larger ones in Foucault's "What is an Author?".

The way we know an author, James continues, is through his taste, a function basic to his existence. As James says: "The 'taste' of the poet is, at bottom and so far as the poet in him prevails over everything else, his active sense of life."<sup>70</sup> James's deliberate (as indicated by the quotation marks) choice here of the word "taste" is telling since gauging a writer's taste is somewhat ambiguous. Taste may suggest discernment of possible intertexts, perception of other art, music, or literature a writer enjoys. Thus, in identifying a writer's taste, the

namer is immediately cast into the maze of language. As James says, by naming a writer's taste we "hold the silver clue to the whole labyrinth of his consciousness."<sup>71</sup> In the written, then, we find not only the author, but also, by discerning his taste, we gain entry into the linguistic labyrinth of difference.

A passage in the Preface to The Spoils of Poynton both elaborates and sums up James's positions on the author vis-à-vis his subject:

That [James's habit of creating from character rather than from plot] points, I think, to a large part of the very source of interest for the artist: it resides in the strong [sic.] consciousness of his seeing all for himself. He has to borrow his motive, which is certainly half the battle; and this motive is his ground, his site and his foundation. But after that he only lends and gives, only builds and piles high, lays together the blocks quarried in the deeps of his imagination and on his personal premises.<sup>72</sup>

The novelist is a bricoleur, constructing text from intertexts, those blocks, though quarried in his imagination, his linguistic consciousness, which are part and parcel of the already-written.

Our altered view of the writer necessitates a revised definition of his primary product, in James's case, the novel. In traditional criticisms the novel is a fictional narrative of life or experience. A realistic novel is, as Stendhal put it, "a mirror walking along a main road."<sup>73</sup> James, too, adopts the mirror image in "The Future of the Novel": "Till the world is an unpeopled void there will be an image in the mirror."<sup>74</sup> In a logocentric metaphysical universe, that image is an accurate representation of the world inhabited by the reader. In a system of difference, however, the image is created by the reader in his interaction with the text: if the novel is a mirror at all, it is not

the reflecting kind: rather, it is the sort of mirror that lures us into the abyss, as in Alice Through the Looking-Glass or in Derrida's Dissemination.

Derrida cites Alice early in his "Dissemination" essay as an example of that phenomenon:

Because it begins by repeating itself, such an event at first takes the form of a story. Its first time takes place several times. Of which, one, among others, is the last. Numerous and plural in every strand of its (k)nots (that is, (k)not any subject, (k)not any object, (k)not any thing), this first time already is not from around here, no longer has a here and now; it breaks up the complicity of belonging that ties us to our habitat, our culture, our simple roots. "In our country," says Alice, "there's only one day at a time." Hence it would seem that what is foreign would have to reside in repetition.<sup>75</sup>

The text is born of the disseminating seed of repetition shot through a mirror, a "chimera" existing between the so-called primary text and the miming text, "the presentation, commentary, interpretation, review, account or inventory"--the attending discourse. The fate of the mirror, which presents the presence of the present, is to be broken, "but it will reflect that breaking in a fiction that remains intact and uninterrupted."<sup>76</sup> Both primary and attending discourse calculate and feign self-presentation and inscribe presence, but the mirror reflects neither: it is a false exit, offering only the sight of its own tain, its own thick reflective foil. The tain, however, is transparent "or rather transformative of what it lets show through."<sup>77</sup> Derrida explains:

The tain in this mirror thus reflects--imperfectly--what comes to it--imperfectly-- . . . and lets through--presently--the ghost of what it reflects, the shadow deformed and reformed according to the figure of what is called present: the upright fixity of what stands before me; "the inscriptions . . . appear inverted, righted, fixed."<sup>78</sup>



The mirror becomes a screening device whereby images and persons are transformed and permuted, and no writing escapes its effects:

No statement can be sheltered, like a fetish, a commodity invested with value, even potentially "scientific" value, from these mirror effects through which the text quotes, quotes itself, sets itself in motion of its own accord, through a generalized graph that undoes all certainty derived from the oppositions between value and nonvalue, respectable and nonrespectable, true and false, high and low, inside and outside, whole and part. All these oppositions are thrown out of whack by the simple "taking-place" of the mirror. Each term takes over the other and excludes itself from itself; each germ becomes steadier and deader than itself. The element envelops and deducts itself from what it envelops. The world comprehends the mirror which captures it and vice versa.<sup>79</sup>

By virtue of the mirror, another version of differance, then, writing does not, cannot reflect. The image in the mirror, the language of the text, is transformed as it is written and read and written again. In another sense, too, the mirror, the novel, is the window in the house of fiction, for, depending on the direction of the light source, a window can act as a mirror. Thus, again, the mirror--the novel--is the window--the author. The writer is written.

Recent theorists have chosen other metaphors as well to account for textuality. Roland Barthes, in The Pleasure of the Text, comments: "we are now emphasizing in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving."<sup>80</sup> Derrida, too, insists upon the woven nature of texts. As his translator Alan Bass notes in his introduction to Writing and Difference: "these essays always affirm that the 'texture' of texts makes any assemblage of them a 'basted' one, i.e., permits only the kind of fore-sewing that emphasizes the necessary spaces between even the finest stitching."<sup>81</sup> Each text, composed as it is of already-written, differential language,

contains other texts. Theorists call this "intertextuality." John Carlos Rowe explains that "intertextuality does not indicate merely the strategy of reading one text with another, but the fact that every text is itself already an intertextual event. . . . the text is not itself."<sup>82</sup> Julia Kristeva provides another metaphor calling the text a mosaic of citations, a fitting rather than a weaving together of disparate elements.<sup>83</sup> But whether we figure the author as mosaicist, architect, tailor, or bricoleur, the text, for structuralists and post-structuralists, still displays its assembled character.

James's metaphors of text as house and as mirror are celebrated as is comparison of the text to a painting. He refers to a novel as an "admirably treacherous picture of actual manners."<sup>84</sup> This description, like the others, has been seized upon by traditionalists to support their contentions that James is the supreme realist painting a faithful portrait of life. A deconstructive approach, however, would note that "treacherous" designates a deceptive, untrustworthy, unreliable picture, the only one possible given the nature of the paints.

Another Jamesian metaphor for textuality, one which receives considerably less attention than the architectural or artistic images, further suggests the appropriateness of a deconstructive reading of the novels. For example, Barthes would have approved James's project as he describes it using a fabric metaphor in Essays in London and Elsewhere:

. . . We are weaving our work together, and it goes on for ever, and it's all one mighty loom . . . And the tissue grows and grows, and we weave into it all our lights and our darkness, all our quarrels and reconciliations, all our stupidities and our strivings, all the friction of our intercourse, and all the elements of our fate. The tangle may seem great at times, but it is all an immeasurable pattern, a spreading many-coloured figure.<sup>85</sup>

A passage in the Preface to Roderick Hudson also employs the fabric metaphor, figuring the text as "the canvas of life" and the writer, specifically young James but generally anyone, as the embroiderer, who works "in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for the needle, and of the tendency inherent in his many-coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes."<sup>86</sup> James continues by suggesting the differing, deferring, and disseminating quality of text:

The development of the flower, of the figure, involved thus an immense counting of holes and a careful selection among them. That would have been, it seemed to him, a brave enough process, were it not the very nature of the holes so to invite, to solicit, to persuade, to practise positively a thousand lures and deceits. The prime effect of so sustained a system, so prepared a surface, is to lead on and on.<sup>87</sup>

Derrida's "De la vérité en pointure" offers itself as a tailor-made intertext to James's discussion in the Preface to Roderick Hudson. Derrida, too, notes the subversive nature of the distinct perforations, the process he calls "pointure." Pointure is both a printer's term, denoting both a pointed iron plate that fixes the sheet to be printed on the tympan, and the hole that plate makes in the paper, and a glover's and cobbler's term naming the number of stitches, thus the size of a shoe or a pair of gloves. These definitive holes in every text create a problematic space, a gap in which attribution takes place.<sup>88</sup>

The pointing, the embroidery of the already-woven canvas (language/ the déjà-écrit) is indeed, as James suggests, treacherous, misleading us at every turn. James offers his readers the help of ficelles, a group

of characters who often act as catalysts, foils, interpreters, or, in the case of the BBC Production of The Golden Bowl, narrator. Literally a thread, the ficelle often "bastes," to use Bass's term, Jamesian texts together. In attempting to smooth the seams, she reveals the gaps that have necessitated her existence. She acts like the lace in "Restitutions," which couples Van Gogh's painted shoes and the feet of the painter. Susan Stringham and Maria Gostrey, whose names, in suggesting "string" and "gossamer," imply threading and metonymically sewing, act, in Derrida's terms, as parerga, out-of-work supplements, not, as James himself admits, part of the text proper. "They may run beside the coach," but they may not so much as get their foot on the step: they are destined to "tread the dusty road."<sup>89</sup> Derrida's outline of the movement of the lace traces the function of each of James's ficelles: "It cuts out but also sews up again. With an invisible lace which perforates the canvas (as la peinture, the "tympan spur," "perforates the paper"), it passes in then out of the canvas to sew it up again in its middle, in its internal worlds." The ficelles as a group are considered to be characteristically Jamesian in conception and function. As the function of the pointure, they attribute the text to James. Moreover, they serve as a metonym for the woven texture of Jamesian narrative, a texture we will examine as it manifests itself in the preceding chapters on The American, The Spoils of Poynton, and The Wings of the Dove.

Throughout his theoretical discourse, James continually reasserts the differential character of the woven text. In the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, he makes an ado of calling the novelistic form just

that: "The novel is of its very nature an 'ado,' an ado about something, and the larger the form it takes the greater of course the ado."<sup>90</sup> The novel, he suggests, is an exercise in deferment: the more elaborate the supplementarity, (the longer the novel), the more dilatory the effect. Because of its dilatory character, the novel is decentered. Regardless of what Blackmur says about the centrality of a central intelligence, James himself notes the decentered nature of his texts in the Preface to The Tragic Muse: "I urge myself to the candid confession that in very few of my productions, to my eye, has the organic centre succeeded in getting into proper position."<sup>91</sup> The language has a mind, a consciousness so to speak, of its own. James continues:

In several of my compositions this displacement has so succeeded, at the crisis, in defying and resisting me, has appeared so fraught with probable dishonour, that I still turn upon them, in spite of the greater or less success of final dissimulation, a rueful and wondering eye. These productions have in fact, if I may be so bold about it, specious and spurious centres altogether, to make up for the failure of the true.<sup>92</sup>

In older criticisms, where the author is perceived as generating meaning through his conscious use of language, the audience is understood as a passive sponge soaking up as much meaning as possible: the better, more "thorough" the reader, the bigger, more absorbant the sponge. Once we deny the writer's ability to create ex nihilo and recognize him instead as a function of the text, we must, necessarily recast the role of the reader. Reading can become a broadly economic event, with the reader as investor, as Seymour Chatman implies:

Whether the narrative is experienced through a performance or through a text, the members of the audience must respond with an interpretation: they cannot avoid participating in



the transaction. They must fill in gaps with essential or likely events, traits, and objects which for various reasons have gone unmentioned.<sup>93</sup>

Other recent critics see the project of reading as more far-reaching than a single transaction. John Carlos Rowe, for example, understands the event in epic terms: "the reader's voyage is a quest, an active engagement of the language of the work and a creative transposition of that language into the forms for his own understanding."<sup>94</sup> The reader, then, becomes writer. Because reading, like writing, filters through language, interpretation cannot determine final meaning, the frequent aim of criticism based on a metaphysics of logos: Rather, reading, in a system of difference, denies such closure, focusing instead on the "differences between texts, the relations of proximity and distance, of citation, negation, irony and parody. Such relations are infinite and work to defer final meaning."<sup>95</sup>

A school of criticism focusing on the primary role of the reader in the production of meaning has grown up in the last decade. Labeled "reader response critics," theorists like Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser believe that the literary work exists in the convergence of text and reader. The text is dynamic, and the reader, in the process of recreation, causes the text to reveal "its potential multiplicity of connections."<sup>96</sup> Like structuralists and post-structuralists, reader response criticism recognizes intertextuality as a component of the recreation process. "The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination."<sup>97</sup>

More radical in their ideologies, structuralists and post-structuralists would claim instead that it is in the free-play of the language of the text and imagination that meaning is deferred.

James, along with structuralists, post-structuralists, and reader-response critics, affirms the productive role of the reader and the responsibility of the reader to accept that role. He was not referring only to those works produced by George Eliot when he wrote in his review in Partial Portraits: "In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader."<sup>98</sup> James insists, Walter Benn Michaels believes, on the responsibility of readers as writers in his Preface to The Golden Bowl. In "Writers Reading: James and Eliot," Michaels understands James as implying that by definition reading is "a form of self-projection, and hence we are responsible not simply to our texts but for them since, at the crudest level, they are us."<sup>99</sup> According to Michaels, James sets up a model of reading in that Preface that presages the reader-response paradigm: "James' account, in its most extreme form, insist [sic.] that the text is a blank page inscribed with the reader's own desires. Hence it locates meaning not in texts but in readers, whose activity is creative."<sup>100</sup>

In a reciprocal event, the writer reads, becomes the audience. As James says in the Preface to The Princess Casamassima: "The teller of a story is primarily, none the less, the listener to it, the reader of it, too."<sup>101</sup> In fact, one of James's most characteristic stands in the Prefaces is taken on the role of the writer, especially the revisionist, as reader. His serious concern with revising his own work began when Scribner's approached him with the New York Edition proposal. Upon

accepting, James was forced to reread, for the first time, his earliest works. The sober master then overhauled the novels of the young Henry James, often, many say, to the detriment of those works. In several cases, especially that of Roderick Hudson and The American,<sup>102</sup> James might have done well to have accepted as implied advice Little Bilham's comment on Chad Newsome's altered state in The Ambassadors: "It's like the new edition of an old book that one has been fond of--revised and amended, brought up to date, but not quite the thing one knew and loved."<sup>103</sup>

In the Preface to the first novel he reread, Roderick Hudson, James discusses his first revising experience:

I have felt myself then, on looking over past productions, the painter making use again and again of the tentative wet sponge. The sunk surface has here and there, beyond doubt, refused to respond: the buried secrets, the intentions, are buried too deep to rise again, and were indeed, it would appear, not much worth the burying. No [sic.] so, however, when the moistened canvas does obscurely flush and when resort to the varnish-bottle is thereby immediately indicated. The simplest figure for my revision of this present array of earlier, later, larger, smaller, canvases, is to say that I have achieved it by the very aid of the varnish-bottle.<sup>104</sup>

James deconstructs his revisionary efforts here by implying a contemporary view of language, which emphasizes its sedimentation. In the prudent use of his sponge and varnish bottle, James suggests that he can reveal meanings concealed in the language of the text. His revision, he implies, is not so much independent rewriting as re-seeing or recovering hidden linguistic layers.

James employs another structuralist/post-structuralist strategy in his Preface to The Golden Bowl, where he treats most fully the project

of revision. Here he employs a tactic associated most closely with J. Hillis Miller and Jacques Derrida via Heidegger, the approach via etymology. In this last of the Prefaces, James finally deals directly with the concept of revision:

Revision had somehow, to my imagination, carried itself--and from my frivolous failure to analyse the content of the word. To revise is to see, or to look over, again--which means in the case of a written thing neither more nor less than to re-read it. I had attached to it, in a brooding spirit, the idea of re-writing--with which it was to have in the event, for my conscious play of mind, almost nothing in common. I had thought of re-writing as so difficult, and even so absurd, as to be impossible--having also indeed, for that matter, thought of re-reading in the same light. But the felicity under the test was that where I had thus ruefully pre-figured two efforts there proved to be but one--and this an effort but at the first blush. What re-writing might be was to remain--it has remained for me to this hour--a mystery. On the other hand the act of revision, the act of seeing it again, caused whatever I looked at on any page to flower before me as into the only terms that honourably expressed it. . . .<sup>105</sup>

The differences between the first published drafts and the New York revisions stopped James quite in his tracks. "This truth," he said,

throws into relief for me the very different dance that the taking in hand of my earlier productions was to lead me. . . . It was, all sensibly, as if the clear matter being still there, even as a shining expanse of snow spread over a plain, my exploring tread, for application to it, had quite unlearned the old pace and found itself naturally falling into another. . . .<sup>106</sup>

Had he the vocabulary, James might have noted that in the revision process he recognized the differential character of language, the free-play of the signifier. As he says, again in that seminal Preface to The Golden Bowl: "The deviations and differences might of course not have broken out at all, but from the moment they began so naturally to multiply, they became, as I say, my very terms of cognition."<sup>107</sup>

For the New York Edition James also added a series of frontispieces, photographs by Alvin Langdon Coburn, whose purpose "largely consists in a 'rendering' of certain inanimate characteristics of London streets."<sup>108</sup> Indeed, the project of the illustrations was to parallel the aim of the novels: to render. In its differential play, that very term "render" subverts itself since it means both to send forth and to bring in. A "rendering" can mean ambiguously both a translation or an interpretation suggesting the collecting function and a reproduction or representation suggesting the dispersing function. The Prefaces do render, in both senses. While gathering up James's body of seemingly prescriptive poetics, they are all the while "shaking off all shackles of theory."<sup>109</sup> Like Derrida's notion of prefacing, James's "rendering" is self-subverting. Rereading the theoretical discourse in this new light leads to the "rendering" of the loose end. Upon our pulling on it, James's literary discourse--the differential field of language that comprises it and the writer, text, and reader within it--unravels.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 27, n. 27..

<sup>2</sup>One of the notable exceptions is William R. Goetz, "Criticism and Autobiography in James's Prefaces," American Literature, 51, No. 3 (1979), 333-348.

<sup>3</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Introd., Of Grammatology by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p. xii.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Johnson, Introd., Dissemination, by Jacques Derrida (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. xxxii.

<sup>5</sup>Spivak, p. xii.

<sup>6</sup>Johnson, p. xxxii.

<sup>7</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, pp. 15-16.

<sup>13</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, pp. 20-21.

<sup>16</sup>Spivak, p. lxv.

<sup>17</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 27, n. 27.

<sup>19</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 27, n. 27.

<sup>20</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 27, n. 27.

<sup>21</sup>Richard P. Blackmur, Introd., The Art of the Novel, by Henry James (New York: Scribner's, 1934), pp. ix-x.

<sup>22</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., "Henry James in Reality," Critical Inquiry, 2, No. 3 (1976), 585, 600.

<sup>23</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., Theory of Fiction: Henry James (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 319-320.

<sup>24</sup>Henry James, "The Future of the Novel," in James E. Miller, Jr. Theory of Fiction: Henry James, p. 340.

<sup>25</sup>Ann Jefferson, The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), p. 110.

<sup>26</sup>Jefferson, citing Gide, p. 110.

<sup>27</sup>Jefferson, p. 110.

<sup>28</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 289.

<sup>29</sup>Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in Partial Portraits (1888; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1905), p. 394.

<sup>30</sup>Jacques Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), p. 130.

<sup>31</sup>Roland Barthes, "A Conversation with Roland Barthes," Signs of the Times (Cambridge: Ganta, 1971), pp. 41-55, cited in Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975). p. 242.

<sup>32</sup>James to Walpole, in James E. Miller, Jr., Theory of Fiction: Henry James, pp. 266-267.

<sup>33</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 84, p. 114.

<sup>34</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup>Spivak, p. lxxvii.

<sup>36</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, pp. 109-110.

<sup>37</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 38.

<sup>38</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 64.

<sup>39</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, pp. 64-65.

<sup>40</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 60.

<sup>41</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 121.

<sup>42</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 270.

- <sup>43</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 119.
- <sup>44</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 119.
- <sup>45</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 307.
- <sup>46</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 84.
- <sup>47</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 304.
- <sup>48</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 304.
- <sup>49</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 304.
- <sup>50</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 304.
- <sup>51</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 325.
- <sup>52</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 44.
- <sup>53</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, pp. 120-121.
- <sup>54</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 121.
- <sup>55</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 230.
- <sup>56</sup>Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, p. 147.
- <sup>57</sup>Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 8-9.
- <sup>58</sup>Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?", in Textual Strategies, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 159.
- <sup>59</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II," The Georgia Review, 30, No. 2 (1976), 345.
- <sup>60</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., "Henry James in Reality," citing James, 594.
- <sup>61</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., "Henry James in Reality," citing James, 594.
- <sup>62</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., "Henry James in Reality," 595.
- <sup>63</sup>Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," October 9 (1979), 18.
- <sup>64</sup>Derrida, "The Parergon," 20.
- <sup>65</sup>Derrida, "The Parergon," 20.
- <sup>66</sup>Derrida, "The Parergon," 21.
- <sup>67</sup>Derrida, "The Parergon," 25-26.

<sup>68</sup>Derrida, "The Parergon," 34.

<sup>69</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 79.

<sup>70</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 340.

<sup>71</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 340.

<sup>72</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 122.

<sup>73</sup>Stendhal, Le Rouge et le noir (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964), p. 361.

<sup>74</sup>James, "The Future of the Novel," in James E. Miller, Jr., Theory of Fiction: Henry James, p. 343.

<sup>75</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 292.

<sup>76</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 295.

<sup>77</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 314.

<sup>78</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 314.

<sup>79</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, pp. 315-316.

<sup>80</sup>Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 64.

<sup>81</sup>Alan Bass, Introd., Writing and Difference, by Jacques Derrida (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), p. xiii-xiv.

<sup>82</sup>John Carlos Rowe, unpublished manuscript, cited in Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 175.

<sup>83</sup>Julia Kristeva, Semiotikè: Recherchès pour une sémanalyse (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 146.

<sup>84</sup>James, "The Future of the Novel," in James E. Miller, Jr., Theory of Fiction: Henry James, p. 341.

<sup>85</sup>Henry James, Essays in London and Elsewhere (New York: 1893), p. 300, cited in Georges Poulet, The Metamorphoses of the Circle, trans. Carley Dawson and Elliott Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 393, n. 9.

<sup>86</sup>James, The Art of Fiction, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup>James, The Art of Fiction, pp. 5-6.

<sup>88</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Restitution of Truth to Size, De la vérité en peinture," trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., Research in Phenomenology (1978), 1-44.

<sup>89</sup>James, The Art of Fiction, p. 55.

<sup>90</sup>James, The Art of Fiction, p. 48.

<sup>91</sup>James, The Art of Fiction, p. 85.

<sup>92</sup>James, The Art of Fiction, p. 86.

<sup>93</sup>Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), p. 28.

<sup>94</sup>John Carlos Rowe, Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), p. 173.

<sup>95</sup>Culler, p. 243.

<sup>96</sup>Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. 278.

<sup>97</sup>Iser, p. 279.

<sup>98</sup>Henry James, "George Eliot," in James E. Miller, Jr., Theory of Fiction: Henry James, p. 321.

<sup>99</sup>Walter Benn Michaels, "Writers Reading: James and Eliot," Modern Language Notes, 91, No. 5 (1976), 838.

<sup>100</sup>Michaels, 847.

<sup>101</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 63.

<sup>102</sup>The new Norton Critical Edition of The American, ed. by James W. Tuttleton, for example, breaks with the general practice of Gregg's theory of copy text by choosing not the New York Edition but the first English edition. In his notes Tuttleton presents a persuasive case for choosing the first English edition as the best available copy text.

<sup>103</sup>Henry James, The Ambassadors, (New York: Scribner's, 1909), I, 177.

<sup>104</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, pp. 11-12.

<sup>105</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, pp. 338-39.

<sup>106</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 336.



<sup>107</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 337.

<sup>108</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 334.

<sup>109</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 336.

CHAPTER THREE

DECONSTRUCTING THE AMERICAN

"What's the water in French, sir?"  
"L'eau," replied Nicholas.  
"Ah!" said Mr. Lillyvick, shaking his head mournfully.  
"I thought as much. Lo, eh? I don't think anything of  
that language--nothing at all."

Charles Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning, critical debate on The American has seized upon the issue of vraisemblance. For example, in a review published in The Nation, May 31, 1877, T. S. Perry complains of the unbelievability of Newman's passion for Madame de Cintr  : "Now, it is impossible to suppose that Newman had not his whole heart in this matter. It was the one love of his life, and all the mothers and brothers in Christendom would have been no more guard for Madame de Cintr   than half a dozen cobwebs."<sup>2</sup> Another reviewer, in The Catholic World, December 1878, takes James to task for the implausibility of Newman's project: "The American, no matter how quickly he makes his money, never thinks of going away from his own country to get a wife."<sup>3</sup> Yet others, mainly French critics, faulted James's presentation of the Bellegardes and their milieu as patently unrealistic.<sup>4</sup> Even when, in his Preface to the New York Edition of The American, James explained that the narrative was a "romance," and not a realistic "novel," critics did not abandon their arguments concerning the realistic content of the text. As recently as 1980 James W. Tuttleton described The American as "a novel of manners

juxtaposing for analysis the mores of an aristocratic French society with the comparative mannerlessness of the American traveler in Paris, specifically a Western businessman who has amassed a sudden fortune and has come abroad to cultivate aesthetic interests and, it turns out, to find a wife."<sup>5</sup>

Almost invariably, those who asserted the narrative's credibility deemed it successful, and those who thought their credulity affronted by an improbable plot gave the novel failing marks. Similarly, those who found the story consonant with their view of reality found it to be unified (which is curious since in real life we do not experience events as organic wholes), and those who found the text unbelievable also faulted it for lack of unity. That vraisemblance and unity should go hand in hand is not surprising if one assumes that the primary aim of the nineteenth-century novel was, in faithfully presenting life, to mold that experience into an aesthetically satisfying organic whole.

What all of these critics neglect to consider, however, is the subversiveness of the language that constitutes the text, a subversiveness that undermines all efforts toward "realism" and "unity." They all assume that language has a strictly representative, referential function. Whether they judge the text a boom or a bust depends on how willing they are to accommodate the various discordant elements of the narrative in order to demonstrate a cohesive, comprehensive unity, which does not exist except as a product of readings that naturalize the text. And the degree to which these critics naturalize the text, that is, bring into line those discordant elements, seems dependent on their accompanying assessment of its vraisemblance.

Instead of reading to naturalize the text, however, we may actively engage the text as an example of écriture, "writing." In reading a text as écriture, we recognize that, as Roland Barthes remarks, "writing still remains full of the recollection of previous usage, for language is never innocent: words have a second-order memory which mysteriously persists in the midst of new meanings."<sup>6</sup> These second-order meanings, stubborn after-images resulting from all earlier modes of writing, supersede the immediate text. Barthes compares the activity of écriture to a chemical experiment: "Any written trace precipitates, as inside a chemical at first transparent, innocent and neutral, mere duration gradually reveals in suspension a whole past of increasing density, like a cryptogram."<sup>7</sup> By accepting that texts are a function of écriture, we reject the notion that language serves a representative function and admit that language is subversive: that the second-order meanings will be revealed "in suspension." In reading, then, we abandon our search for "meaning," since it is bound to be undercut by other forms of écriture. Jonathan Culler defines the activity of reading required by écriture: "To read is to participate in the play of the text, to locate zones of resistance and transparency, to isolate forms and determine their content and then to treat that content in turn as a form with its own content, to follow, in short, the interplay of surface and envelope."<sup>8</sup>

Barthes first defined écriture in 1953, and since then Jacques Derrida has altered and expanded the definition so that today a description of écriture entails not only intertextuality and the sedimented nature of language, as Barthes had suggested in his assertion of

linguistic corruption by previous usage, but also dissemination. Writing, as a disseminating activity, is defined by Derrida as "the impossibility for a chain to stop at a signified (signifié) which does not restart the chain as a result of the term's already having been placed in a position of signifying substitution."<sup>9</sup> Writing, then, instead of fixing meaning ensures its deferment.

As an effect of the dissemination process, as écriture, The American is hardly innocent although traditionally thematic paradigms may imply as much. Loose threads, snags, holes exist at the seams, calling attention to its fabrication, and the "realistic" surface is pulled apart at the most crucial points to reveal underlying layers of text. These supplementary layers in turn reveal their own lacunae. In moving from one layer to another searching for the origin and thus for meaning, we get lost, somewhat like Newman in the conventions of French society. We, like he, are deferred, sidetracked again and again, finally realizing that meaning, which we expect to reside at the origin, is unattainable because it is unreachable. Originality, and thus ultimate meaning, is declared void both in the presentation of The American as text and in the presentation of Newman himself, and by the end of the novel, in the climactic presentation of the murder note, a metaphor of lost meaning. In the past readers have assumed a palpable meaning recoverable at a fixed origin, an assumption that has colored their largely mimetic readings of The American. The text, however, defies such an assumption and demonstrates itself to be neither realistic, nor unified, nor original. It demands to be read as écriture because, as a result of dissemination, all origins are lost: in the sediment



of intertextuality, in the abymes of architecture, in the translation of language.

Although I assert that origins--in terms of both originary sites and original ideas--are absent in The American, and that absence sets in motion the disseminating chain of signification, those early critics who liked the novel commended it for its novelty. (Originality, of course, along with vraisemblance and organic unity, is another standard criterion of work in post-Romantic logocentric criticisms.) For example, one reviewer in The Galaxy, July 1877, wrote: "The plot of 'The American' has the great merit of originality, and it is well constructed."<sup>10</sup> A review in The Literary World, also in July 1877, echoes the evaluation: "The American is a very modern novel; with no flavor of the past and no prophecy of the future. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Twentieth-century critics note James's debt to earlier works; however, they have maintained their insistence on the originality of the text and on James's authority. Oscar Cargill, for instance, cited L'Etrangère, a play by Alexandre Dumas  fils, running at the Théâtre Français during James's 1876 Paris stay, and an 1858 Turgenev novel, A Nest of Gentlefolk, as the origins of the Jamesian product.<sup>12</sup> Although he denies the novelty of its imagery and subject matter, naming racial images, archetypal patterns, and cultural fables permeating the text, George Knox nonetheless makes The American out to be original. As romance and cultural parable, the novel is, he announces, an original effort at The Great American novel.<sup>13</sup>

Source studies, however, while assuming artistic creation and control, have always undercut notions of originality by calling into question the fine line between innovation and plagiarism. Recent

discussions of influence deriving from, among others, Harold Bloom's work, have proven to be more feasible explanations of textual evolution. Such theories have it that literary history is the account of "misprision," of willful misreading. "Influence, as I conceive it," Bloom comments, "means that there are no texts, but only relationships between texts."<sup>14</sup> J. Hillis Miller reiterates Bloom's basic idea by nullifying the New Critics' insistence on textual integrity: "a literary text is not a thing in itself, 'organically unified,' but a relation to other texts which are relations in their turn. The study of literature is therefore a study of intertextuality."<sup>15</sup>

Thus the concept of intertextuality defies the artificial boundaries established by traditional notions of source, allusion, and influence. By voiding integrity and insisting upon permeability, intertextuality, in fact, renders source, allusion, and influence dead since they all seek origins. So varied and complex is the intertextual field of The American, that it suggests itself as the chief feature of the text. Including artistic and musical as well as literary intertexts, folklore, myth, and maxims, the vast intertextual field subverts all expectations of The American's originality. Moreover, the intertexts reveal spaces in the fabric into which meaning, due to the absence of origin, is disseminated.

The many intertexts work in myriad ways to reveal the gaps. First and most simply, by insistently naming other texts and thus implicating them in the text's production, The American self-consciously announces its own textual activity. For example, the paintings James names throughout the novel, especially in the early descriptions of Newman's

rambles in the Louvre, are linguistic intertexts although they be writ in oils. The specific narratives include paintings by Murillo, Raphael, Titian, and Veronese. All narrate fictions, introducing underlying layers of meaning, which act like preliminary sketches lurking beneath the painted surface of a Renaissance canvas: sometimes the sketch is a precursor of the finished work, sometimes it is a different subject altogether. For a case in point, the second sentence of the novel has Newman studying "Murillo's beautiful moon-borne Madonna,"<sup>16</sup> certainly the artists's celebrated "The Immaculate Conception," which portrays an elaborate figure of the Virgin surrounded by tens of cherubs gazing every which way in admiration as well as in private thought. Although the painting provides a narrative intertext, its relationship to the text of The American is deferred, offering a silence almost even before the novel begins.

Several musical intertexts similarly present other narratives, which permeate The American for no other apparent reason than to insist on its textual nature. Two of Offenbach's light operas, La pomme de Paris and Gazza Ladra are mentioned, for example, in connection with opera-loving Lord Deepmere's visit to Paris: "He always went to Ireland for the fishing, and he came to Paris for the new Offenbach things. They always brought them out in Dublin, but he couldn't wait" (p. 162). Significantly, though, these intertexts are ignored by "naturalizing" critics, for they have little import for The American. Instead of sounding a reinforcing note, they offer only silence.

Other texts also permeate The American doing little else but reiterating its textual character and fulling the textual fabric. The

intertextual warehouse of The American is well-stocked with, for example, guidebooks (like Baedeker's), hagiographies (we discover these in a layer of meaning underlying Madame de Cintr  's choice of Veronica as her name when she takes the veil and her mother's comment that she would rather see her daughter as Sister Catherine than as Mrs. Newman), Books of Beauty, feuilletons in the Figaro (not to mention innumerable newspaper accounts narrated by M. Nioche in his effort to teach Newman French), legends (Newman is perceived as a character in one), a treatise on logic, a police-detective's report, and Debrett's Peerage. Moreover, the map of Newman's perigrinations resembles an intertextual tour guide covering many centuries of English literature:

He watched the deer in Windsor Forest and admired the Thames from Richmond Hill; he ate whitebait and brown-bread and butter at Greenwich, and strolled in the grassy shadow of the cathedral of Canterbury. He also visited the Tower of London and Madame Tussaud's exhibition. One day he thought he would go to Sheffield, and then, thinking again, he gave it up. Why should he go to Sheffield? (p. 295)

Newman's route implicates Pope, in the reference to Windsor Forest, Thomson, in the reference to Richmond Hill, Dryden, in the reference to Greenwich, Chaucer, in the reference to Canterbury, and Shakespeare, in the reference to the Tower of London. But why does Newman make such a trip when he confesses to reading nothing but an occasional newspaper? These "allusions" are intertexts remarking the novel as written, created from a mosaic of preceding textual citations.

Other intertexts in The American function self-referentially as mises en abyme, representations or quotations of the text within the text itself. J. Hillis Miller explains that mise en abyme, a term borrowed from heraldry, is "a shield which has in its center (abyme) a

smaller image of the same shield, and so, by implication, ad infinitum, with ever smaller and smaller shields receding toward the central point."<sup>17</sup> Such sequences, repeated phrases, and sentence structures are also mises en abyme as are the lines of successive literary influence and misinterpretation.<sup>18</sup> For an item to qualify as a mise en abyme, it must fulfill several requirements: "it must first have points of analogy with the text as a whole, and, secondly it must, ontologically speaking, be embedded (emboîté) in the spatio-temporal world of the text, existing both as an object within it and as a representation or mirror of it."<sup>19</sup>

Three different sorts of narrative intertexts, a painting, an opera, and a fairy tale, all serve as a mise en abyme: "the structural revolt of a fragment of narrative against the overall narrative which contains it." This revolt leads to self-revelation. As Jean Ricardou notes, "As soon as the narrative contests itself, it immediately presents itself as narrative."<sup>20</sup> And, in presenting itself as narrative, in affirming artifice, "realistic" presence falls away, and gaps and holes are revealed. Such a mise en abyme occurs in the presentation of Paul Veronese's depiction of the marriage feast at Cana, which opens Chapter Two.

In the left-hand corner of the picture is a young woman with yellow tresses confined in a golden head-dress; she is bending forward and listening, with the smile of a charming woman at a dinner-party, to her neighbour. Newman detected her in the crowd, admired her, and perceived that she too had her votive copyist--a young man with his hair standing on end. (p. 26)

The scene of Newman's studying the canvas foreshadows coming textual events. "The recognition of a beautiful woman, the votive attention,



the marriage, the splendid banquet, wifely charm at a dinner party, the wife as an object of the collector's mania--all of these take on full form as the plot unfolds," James W. Tuttleton explains.<sup>21</sup>

This type of mise en abyme is also called internal intertextuality, the reference by a text to its own activity.<sup>22</sup> The implications for meaning are the same, despite the terminology: meaning is abysed in the abyme, folded into the text and thus deferred in internal intertextuality. A similar textual fold reveals a blank space in the scene at the opera. Several critics have commented on James's selection of Mozart's Don Giovanni as the program at which Valentin is challenged to the duel that eventually proves fatal. James W. Tuttleton remarks:

The conversations among the principals about the opera sets up a series of parallels among the characters of the opera and of the novel, in which, above all, Newman is the Don Juan whose pursuit of Claire as Donna Elvira will be obstructed by Urbain as the man of stone, with the ironic reversal that Newman will be the one forsaken, not Donna Elvira.<sup>23</sup>

The irony that Tuttleton notes results from intertextuality, for we must read the scene between Newman and Valentin through the filter of Don Giovanni.

Similarly, intertextuality opens up an abyme in the text of Newman's romance with Madame de Cintr , in turn suggesting the ultimate deferral of their relationship. Madame de Cintr  narrates the story of the beautiful Florabella who, after starving for six months, is taken by her lover to the Land of the Pink Sky to eat plum cakes. Madame de Cintr  insists on the intertextuality of the story when she tells Newman "I could never have gone through the sufferings of the beautiful Florabella"

(p. 138), and some critics have further insisted on the mise en abyme quality of the embedded narrative by identifying the Land of the Pink Sky as Newman's California.

In addition to remarking the text as artifice and to offering mises en abyme, the intertextual field in The American also presents models or metaphors of text in the images of a statuette, a fan, and a chant. The first, "a grotesque little statuette in ivory, of the sixteenth century . . . a gaunt, ascetic-looking monk, in a tattered gown and cowl, kneeling with clasped hands and pulling a portentously long face," serves as Newman's response to the Reverend Mr. Babcock's letter accusing him of hedonism. "It was a wonderfully delicate piece of carving, and in a moment, through one of the rents of his gown, you espied a fat capon hung round the monk's waist" (p. 73). Tuttleton notes that James "intends us to see a latent meaning in this gift" because of the question posed immediately following: "In Newman's intention what did the figure symbolise? Did it mean that he was going to try to be as 'high-toned' as the monk looked at first, but that he feared he should succeed no better than the friar, on a closer inspection, proved to have done?"<sup>24</sup> This textual moment verifies Barthes' contention that what interests us the most is the space where the folds separate. He asks in The Pleasure of the Text: "Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?"<sup>25</sup> In presenting the statuette with the all-important opening which, in revealing the capon, subverts convention, the text offers a model of itself, of its own subverting realism and originality. A mise en abyme is thus created, and meaning is deferred into the gap opened simultaneously by the gaping garment and by the two questions

"What did the figure symbolize?" and "Was he going to be as 'high-toned as the monk looked at first? ". As a model of textuality, the statuette insists that the gaps are there and urges the reader toward reading the text as a voyeur.

Another objet d'art in the story with a similar facility for opening and closing serves as another textual model. This second example, the fan Madame de Bellegarde opens in the scene where Newman suggests throwing an engagement party, depicts "a fête champêtre--a lady with a guitar, singing, and a group of dancers round a garlanded Hermes" (p. 171). After examining her fan, Madame Bellegarde decides against allowing Newman to pre-empt her opportunity to be the first party-giver. The fan, of course, has offered Newman's scenario, a fiction within a fiction, a potentiality the family matriarch would like to avert. She reads the text of the fan as a narrative of joyous celebration in which the singing lady with the guitar is Madame de Cintré, the dancers are the guests, and Hermes, the god of science and commerce and the patron of travelers--the center of attention--is Newman himself. As a vehicle remarking the text within the text, the fan offers a mise en abyme. Moreover, as a fan, it serves as a device to insist upon the textuality of both and so the deferment to which they are subject. Derrida's commentary on the movement of the fan in the Mallarméan text is apropos here:

it is also to remark that the fan re-marks itself: no doubt it designates the empirical object one thinks one knows under that name, but then, through a tropic twist (analogy, metaphor, metonymy), it turns toward all the semic units that have been identified (wing, fold, plume, page, rustling, flight, dancer, veil, etc., each one finding itself folding and unfolding, opening/closing

with the movement of a fan, etc.); it opens and closes each one, but it also inscribes above and beyond that movement the very movement and structure of the fan-as-text, the deployment and retraction of all its valences; the spacing, fold, and hymen between all these meaning-effects, with writing setting them up in relations of difference and resemblance.<sup>26</sup>

With the folding and unfolding of the fan, what becomes of Newman's future, including Madame de Cintr 's taking of "the veil" is inscribed, and the scene on the fan is forever deferred. Like the rent in the monk's gown, then, the fan reveals a subversive text.

The "strange, lugubrious" chanting of the Carmelite nuns at their cloister offers itself as the third textual metaphor in The American. "It began softly, but it presently grew louder, and as it increased it became more of a wail and a dirge" (p. 277). As an intertext, it, like the painting, objets d'art, and operas, presents further embedded narratives leading in different directions into the maze. For the chant becomes another text constructed entirely of the intertexts provided by each nun's life-text: "It was their dirge over their buried affections and over the vanity of earthly desires" (p. 277). Again, like the fan, the chant becomes a model: in folding back on itself again and again the repetitive dirge mimics the repetitive weave of narrative. Though the gaps be inaudible, like the space in the textual fabric--the folds in the fan and the rent in the robe--they are nonetheless there, for each nun must take the time to inhale so that she may defer the end of the chant. "The chant kept on, mechanical and monotonous, with dismal repetitions and despairing cadences" (p. 277).

All of the intertextual references, from painting and music, from literature, both English and Continental, myth and modern, from maxims,

even from embedded fictions never bound separately, such as the story of Madame de Cintr  's first marriage and the tale of Mrs. Bread's youth, add layer after layer to the narrative. Thus supplemented into existence, The American presents a complex intertextual surface, which appears to offer a fully present reality and so meaning; however, each of these intertextual references reveals a space, a gap, a silence, which subverts the "reality" of the narrative. The text gapes, like the role of the monk, to reveal as its capon, a space where presence and so meaning were assumed to be fixed. Riddled with holes, the surface of the text cannot maintain meaning. Significance seeps away into the sedimented layers and is deferred into the abyss.

One last category of intertexts, the embedded historical fictions permeating the fabric of the novel, points to the lesson of its intertextuality: that the assembled texts forming The American create a surface which is supplementary, a presence which can be deconstructed. Derrida asks: "How does one generate this illusion? How is presence attained without really attaining it? We approach here the strange logic of the supplement." He goes on to explain that a supplement is a surplus, "a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence."<sup>27</sup> Simultaneously, however, the supplement supplements. "It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void."<sup>28</sup> Josu   Harari recapitulates: "the supplement is added to make up for a deficiency, but as such it reveals a lack, for since it is in excess, the supplement can never be adequate to the lack."<sup>29</sup>



Each of the historical fictions cited in The American is supplementary and ends by revealing the abyss over which it is woven. For example, on one of his sentimental journeys (itself an intertextual situation), Newman stands before the beautiful Gothic tower of the Hôtel de Ville in Brussels. "He stood for half an hour in the crowded square before this edifice . . . listening to a toothless old cicerone mumble in broken English the touching history of Counts Egmont and Horn; and he wrote the names of these gentlemen--for reasons best known to himself--on the back of an old letter" (p. 66). We never discover or even pause to speculate on the reason for Newman's notation, yet we should note that he retextualizes the text of the Counts on another text, the letter, within the text of The American. In such a manner, this historical intertext presents a mise en abyme that reveals a void. An entire chapter of French history is presented as a void when Newman calls on Madame D'Outreville. She narrates a fiction involving her mother's snub of Napoleon, and "it occurred to Newman that her evasion of a chapter of French history more interesting to himself might possibly be the result of an extreme consideration for his feelings" (p. 290). In any case, the chapter is never approached and the silence of the gap announces itself.

Perhaps the most curious historical intertext is Urbain de Bellegarde's account of a different chapter of national history. We learn that "He is writing a history of the Princesses of France who never married" (p. 102). He writes, then, about barrenness, non-producing voids, in-life supplements to death, who, rather than reproduce and generate life, "meaning," serve only to rename the abyss, the symbol of

the deferment of meaning. Claire, the fairy princess, of course, becomes, as a nun, another of those supplements to death, cloistered away in the Rue d'Enfer, which suggests the most famous of literary abysses. Further reinforcing the absence suggested by the void is the fact that no one knows where Urbain is during the early morning.

Valentin remarks: "I don't remember ever in my life to have seen him before noon-before breakfast. No one ever saw him. We don't know how he is then. Perhaps he's different. Who knows? Posterity, perhaps, will know. That's the time he works, in his cabinet, at the history of the Princesses" (p. 229).

Not only his text, but also the American himself, Christopher Newman, is an already-written. James's opening picture of him, in fact, relies on stereotype:

His usual attitude and carriage were of a rather relaxed and lounging kind, but when, under a special inspiration, he straightened himself, he looked like a grenadier on parade. . . . He had a very well-formed head, with a shapely, symmetrical balance of the frontal and the occipital development, and a good deal of straight, rather dry brown hair. His complexion was brown, and his nose had a bold, well-marked arch. His eye was of a clear, cold gray, and, save for a rather abundant moustache, he was clean-shaved. He had the flat jaw and sinewy neck which are frequent in the American type. (p. 18)

Having presented his hero as a "typical American," James then attempts to add details, which Charles Anderson thinks give Newman "individuality and make him credibly human":<sup>30</sup> "Frigid and yet friendly, frank yet cautious, shrewd yet credulous, positive yet sceptical, confident yet shy" (pp. 18-19). Plugged into the already-written rhetorical formula of antithesis, however, these qualities are removed from the "ambiguous" into the realm of the intertextual. When Mrs. Tristram calls Newman

the "great Western Barbarian," thereby investing him with more already-written characteristics, Newman is further textualized and distanced from mimetic reality and from originality.

Charles Anderson demonstrates that James's portrait of Newman derives from some real as well as mythic sources: for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's provinciality in aesthetic matters may have provided the suggestion for Newman's preference for copies rather than the cracked, old originals of masterpieces. James Russell Lowell, of whom James wrote, "inveterately, in England or on the Continent, the American abroad," and William Dean Howells, who had "an intense national consciousness," (not to mention Christopher Columbus, the type of adventurer) also helped rewrite Christopher Newman. Anderson concludes his discussion of Newman's evolution by insisting on his textuality: "Such an account of the hero's diverse origins may seem to present him as a thing of shreds and patches. But to the extent that he is a typical American he has to be a composite figure, since the 'type' never exists in any single individual."<sup>31</sup> Newman, like The American, is unoriginal, supplemented by layers into presence. His taste for copies, rather than Old Masters, itself, as Anderson points out, an already-written convention by 1877, seals Newman's unoriginal character.<sup>32</sup>

In The American, both text and character, then, we discover an unoriginal bricolage, a mosaic of citation from a variety of other texts, like the tall story Newman has learned to tell with Western humorists, produced by "the trick of piling up consistent wonders" (p. 97). The mosaic, the assemblage, speaks itself as such not only by referring to itself as text through intertextual strategies but also by insisting

throughout upon various other sorts of assemblages. The Louvre, for example, the setting of Newman's opening encounter with Noémie, is a grand assemblage of art works, and Newman, himself as we have seen is an intertextual entity as suggested by his name and the emphasis on his character as a type. Madame de Cintré is described as a "compendium of all the virtues" (p. 117), and her fate is the Carmelite convent. The word "convent," of course, derives from the same root as "convene," and in one of its meanings denotes an assemblage. A few critics have noted the novel's assembled nature, but cite it as evidence of James's immaturity as a writer. After explicating several of James's intertexts, James W. Tuttleton writes:

I point to this whole assemblage of materials as really another signal instance of James's attempt to transform the sow's ear of sentimental romanticism into the silk purse of the "new realism." But the effort is not wholly successful, and James was surely right in remarking that the book has a hole in it almost large enough to sink into.<sup>33</sup>

On the contrary, the assemblage is no attempt at transformation: assemblages are not endowed with such powers. They can only remark their assembled character and provide a supplement, which, by its very nature, points to the inevitable holes in every fiction. They provide a textual surface over an unsoundable, silent depth.

Assembled surfaces disguising or hiding various sorts of abysses are woven into the texture of The American. The novel, is in fact, replete with passages discussing architectural assemblages: houses, apartments, churches, as well as texts, as we have already seen. Each of these descriptions presents only surface, as does the assembled text as a whole. For example, in an early part of the novel, Newman compares

the faces of the houses in the Faubourg St. Germain to the blank walls of Eastern seraglios. "Newman thought it a queer way for rich people to live; his idea of grandeur was a splendid facade, diffusing its brilliancy outward too, irradiating outward" (p. 50). His interest, we note, is in the facade, the assembled surface, which, by definition, suggests artificiality or subversion. Such a concern is intensely textual. Having gained entrance to the Bellegardes' home in the Faubourg, Newman is offered a guided tour of the structure. When Newman declines, Valentin shakes his head: "Ah, you have defeated a great scheme, sir!" "'A scheme? I don't understand,' said Newman" (p. 84). Although Valentin vows to explain at a later date, he never does. "Scheme" is a revealing term to use since it points to depths, specifically to textual deep-structure, the underlying assemblage supporting the surface. Scheme can be defined variously as an outline, a draft of a projected literary work, a plan for the method of a work, or a complex unity in which the component elements cooperate and interact according to a plan. In this scene between Newman and Valentin, then, the American, the representative of the assembled scheme, is shown to operate, ironically enough, solely on the surface level.

Newman's apartment is a text, too, supplemented lavishly to call attention to its surface texture. "It was situated on the Boulevard Haussmann, on a first-floor, and consisted of a series of rooms, gilded from floor to ceiling a foot thick, draped in various light shades of satin, and chiefly furnished with mirrors and clocks" (p. 78). He himself is said to have "built an edifice" (p. 91). Edifice can be



defined as a fabric, a structure, further reinforcing the surface, the constructed, even woven quality of text.

Valentin's apartment, perhaps even more textual, is furnished in a similarly extravagant fashion:

his walls were covered with rusty arms and ancient panels and platters, his doorways draped in faded tapestries, his floors muffled in the skins of beasts. Here and there was one of those uncomfortable tributes to elegance in which the upholsterer's art, in France, is so prolific; a curtained recess with a sheet of looking-glass in which, among the shadows, you could see nothing; a divan on which, for its festoons and furbelows, you could not sit: a fireplace draped, flounced, and frilled to the complete exclusion of fire. The young man's possessions were in picturesque disorder, and his apartment was pervaded by the odour of cigars, mingled with perfumes more inscrutable. Newman thought it a damp, gloomy place to live in, and was puzzled by the obstructive and fragmentary character of the furniture. (p. 96)

All the furnishings, the intertexts, if you will, which assembled, define the apartment are so supplemented as to be useless: one may neither sit on the sofa nor light a fire on the hearth. They self-reflexively insist upon their own purposelessness and lack of fundamental meaning. The emphasis in the furnishings is on surface, on prolific, elegant upholstery.

Such decor disturbs simple Mrs. Bread, and when Newman suggests that she choose any room in the apartment for her own, she replies: "A room, sir? They are all too fine for a dingy old body like me. There isn't one that hasn't a bit of gilding." Newman answers in a way that affirms the textuality of the rooms, the novel, and their deconstructability: "It's only tinsel, Mrs. Bread. . . . If you stay there a while it will all peel off of itself." Mrs. Bread responds appropriately: "Oh, sir, there are things enough peeling off already!" (p. 273).

Throughout the text returns to comment on the constructed, assembled nature of its surface structure. Not only Newman but also Fleurières and the Carmelite convents are called "edifices," calling into play the root meaning of the word, edifice as fabrication. The text also insists upon the newest of Newman's hobbies, architecture: the art or science of building or constructing edifices, fabrications--texts. He tells Valentin that he has toured 470 churches and wonders if that indicates sufficient interest in the topic. Even Claire de Cintré's name, cintré meaning "arch," especially in a dark, romanesque church, suggests construction visible at the surface while hinting at the labyrinth within. We recall that in the Preface James comments that in The American he was plotting "arch-romance," a term which suggests architectural as well as high romance. In these ways the subject of architecture becomes the architexture of The American, presenting a supplemented surface yet revealing an underlying absence.

A particular decorative and textual feature present in both Newman's and Valentin's apartments provides a passage into the depths of the abyss over which edifice and text are constructed. Both gentlemen's residences are furnished with mirrors. In Newman's apartment they serve as one of the chief furnishings; in Valentin's a mirror appears among the shadows in a curtained recess. A Derridean intertext "WriTing, EncAsIng, ScreeNing," in Dissemination makes itself available here to explain the phenomenon of the mirror, an opening into the text that goes unnoticed as opening. The mirror is a "diaphanous element guaranteeing the transparency of the passageway to whatever presents itself."<sup>34</sup>

It is a two-way mirror reflecting the text as text and also transforming what it permits to show through; however, it neither reflects nor transmits perfectly. As a mirror, it is subversive, distorting reality by representing it in reverse. The mirror is an operational paradox, the "original" surface, which also contains the depths: "Everything 'begins,' then, with citation, in the creases [faux plis] of a certain veil, a certain mirrorlike screen."<sup>35</sup> "The screen," Derrida continues, "without which there would be no writing, is also a device described in writing. The writing process is reflected in what is written."<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, in The American mirrors provide points of entry into the textual labyrinth by suggesting the void underlying the supplement, by implying in its reflective property the infinite deferral of citation. In the sheet of looking glass in Valentin's rooms, for example, one is unable to see anything, the text tells us except, we suppose, its own tain. Even if it did reflect, it would represent the supplementary texts of tapestry, drapery, upholstery. Likewise, when Valentin criticizes his sister-in-law's gown saying, "You might as well wear a standing ruff as such a dress as that," she turns to the mirror for verification: "The mirror descended low, and yet it reflected nothing but a large unclad flesh surface" (p. 121). Since flesh is the surface of the text of the body, by reflecting nothing but a flesh surface the mirror doubly insists upon its own surface. At other moments, however, mirrors in The American act as the "screen without which there would be no writing . . . a device described in writing." The description of Fleurières is presented, for example, in a mirror image which, the text

insists, has been written, not only in Newman's guide-book of the province but also in the conventions of the romance, more specifically the gothic romance. We note its prominent position in the landscape, and its deep-set windows, features reminiscent of, for example, the opening to Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher".

It presented to the wide paved area which preceded it, and which was edged with shabby farm-buildings, an immense façade of dark time-stained brick, flanked by two low wings, each of which terminated in a little Dutch-looking pavilion, capped with a fantastic roof. Two towers rose behind, and behind the towers was a mass of elms and beeches, now just faintly green.

But the great feature was a wide green river, which washed the foundations of the château. The building rose from an island in the circling stream, so that this formed a perfect moat, spanned by a two-arched bridge without a parapet. The dull brick walls, which here and there made a grand straight sweep, the ugly little cupolas of the wings, the deep-set windows, the long steep pinnacles of mossy slate, all mirrored themselves in the quiet water. (p. 237)

Providing another intertextual dimension is Newman's subsequent remark comparing Fleurières to a Chinese penitentiary.

Mirrors, both as physical feature and as self-reflexive attribute of the text, introduce us to the disseminating, deforming nature of textuality. By repeatedly reflecting and transforming other surfaces, other already-writtens, or as Derrida calls them "citations," mirrors act as penetrable screens. Once we, like Alice, recognize the mirror for what it is and walk through it, we begin to experience the play of language that works to defer meaning.

Beyond the mirrors in The American lies a linguistic labyrinth in which rhetoric and word games infinitely defer meaning by suggesting intertexts, creating ambiguities, and otherwise subverting meaning.

For instance, in the introductory characterization of Newman, a description noted earlier, he is described in terms of antithesis: "Frigid and yet friendly, frank yet cautious, shrews yet credulous, positive yet sceptical, confident yet shy" (pp. 18-19). Madame de Cintr  is introduced by the identical rhetorical pattern: "In her whole person there was something both youthful and subdued, slender and yet ample, tranquil yet shy" (p. 85). Oxymorons appear (Madame de Cintr 's utterances are called "soft roughnesses" [p. 82]) as well as paradoxes (Newman tells Madame de Cintr  that her freedom is "a dreary bondage" [p. 113]).

Other sorts of word games appear as well, suggesting that language has lost its ability to communicate, that every word contains within itself its own deconstructing opposite. For example, when Valentin pays Newman a visit, he admires the decor:

Newman looked at him a moment, and then, "So it is very ugly?" he inquired.

"Ugly, my dear sir? It is magnificent."

"That is the same thing, I suppose," said Newman (p. 88).

Likewise, when Newman is trying to pump Valentin for information about his sister, he asks, "Is she grave or gay?" Valentin replies, "She is both; not alternately, for she is always the same. There is gravity in her gaiety, and gaiety in her gravity" (p. 101). Ugly, magnificent, gravity, gaiety, in the labyrinth one term slides into the other.

An obvious pun may elude readers unaccustomed to spotting such linguistic slides. At an early point in the novel, Valentin confesses



to Newman his fear of obesity: "he was too short, as he said, to afford a belly. He rode and fenced and practiced gymnastics with unremitting zeal, and if you greeted him with a 'How well you are looking!' he started and turned pale. In your well he read a grosser monosyllable" (p. 80). Although "gross" in English suggests obesity, French speakers may understand the "grosser" monosyllable as gros, French for "fat."

Another word game, however, reaches deeper into the plot of the novel and the specific problems it raises. I can think of few other words in which the adjective "frank" or the adverb "frankly" appears more often than in The American. On a cursory flip through the novel I count eighteen instances of the words. I do not doubt that one might verify yet other uses of "frank" since the term and its cognates present important critical issues. For example, even the most traditional critic can read this novel as an early example of the international novel, pitting the American Christopher Newman against the Bellegardes, the French, the Franks. Thus, Noémie is indeed, in more than one sense, a "frank coquette." Her greatest concern and that of the Bellegardes as well is the franc, the French medium of exchange. As part of his suit for Madame de Cintré's hand, the American reports on his financial status: "Newman expressed his income in a round number which had the magnificent sound that large aggregations of dollars put on when they are translated into francs" (p. 128). Listening in silence, Madame de Bellegarde finally responds, "You are very frank," and truly, for her and her family, Newman is the incarnation of the coin of the realm.

In a different meaning, a frank is defined as an enclosure, especially to feed hogs in. Although no swine populate the pages of the novel, enclosures, fences, walls act as repeating image patterns. Due in part to its walls, for example, Fleurières resembles a Chinese penitentiary, and the salient feature of the Carmelite convent, for Newman, is "a high-shouldered blank wall all round it," a wall further characterized as pale, dead, discoloured (p. 305). The Bellegardes' home in the Faubourg St. Germain, we recall, is also distinguished by its blank wall, making it look like a convent. In a fine example of a word undermining its own meaning, frank also signifies freedom, as in the expression "frank and free." In The American a major conflict is that Madame de Cintré is not free to come and go beyond the walls of her homes. And, at the end, instead of becoming franc et quitte, she enters into another sort of captivity behind the convent walls.

Although Madame de Cintré is not able to be quite frank or open with Newman due to her franked position, Newman can be described as frank in many senses: free to come and go (as demonstrated by his traveling the continents of Europe, Asia, and North America); liberal, bounteous, generous, lavish with his money (as demonstrated by his offer of a dowry to Noémie and by a promise of a home to Mrs. Bread), ingenuous, open, sincere, with undisguised feelings and candid, unreserved speech.

With an ellipsis of "language," "frank" also signifies a mixed language: a lingua franca. M. Nioche, Newman's French tutor, speaks such a language:

The language spoken by M. Nioche was a singular compound, which I shrink from the attempt to reproduce in its integrity. He had apparently once possessed a certain knowledge of English, and his accent was oddly tinged with the cockneyism of the British metropolis. But his learning had grown rusty with disuse, and his vocabulary was defective and capricious. He had repaired it with large patches of French, with words anglicised by a process of his own, and with native idioms literally translated. The result, in the form in which he in all humility presented it, would be scarcely comprehensible to the reader, so that I have ventured to trim and sift it. (p. 52)

Thus, throughout the novel, whenever M. Nioche's speech is written, we are to understand that the reportage is inaccurate. Since what we read then is a disseminated, "mirror" translation, meaning is subverted and delayed beyond recovery. What we find in the text is merely a substitute, a supplement. In the place of actual speech, we discover moments of text when we ask "Who speaks?"<sup>37</sup>

M. Nioche's and the text's use of *frank*, then, in all of its subversive meanings, reintroduces the undecidability and ultimate delay inherent in all language and thus in all texts. Linguistic difference, in fact, thoroughly deconstructs The American, revealing it to be another fabrication, another architecture, another facade constructed over a silent void. The hole James feared at the heart of the text is the text.

Roman Jakobson comments in "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation": "For us, both as linguists and as ordinary word-users, the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign."<sup>38</sup> When we move from translating intralinguistically to interlinguistically, meaning is further differentiated: "translation from one language into another substitutes messages in one language not for

separate code-units but for entire messages in some other language. Such a translation is a reported speech; the translator recodes and transmits a message received from another source."<sup>39</sup> Translation, in any form, thus involves disseminating movement away from the original sign. A good translator, one who can minimize the omnipresent gaps in all translational effort, needs both the ultimate skill in his native tongue and knowledge of the foreign language (and the world).<sup>40</sup>

Christopher Newman has neither. Although his commercial success is tremendous, he quit school at age ten, never finding either time or inclination to engage in intellectual pursuits until his trip to Europe. Declaring himself unfond of books--he has never read a novel--and devoid of the "small change of conversation," Newman is linguistically naive. His lack of linguistic prowess equals his lack of linguistic practice. Newspapers form his principal reading; thus, we are not surprised to discover that he believes "words were acts and acts were steps in life" (p. 281). Understanding so little about his own language, he nonetheless projects and contracts to learn French from M. Nioche, whose knowledge of English is, as we have seen, likewise sketchy.

Abysmal gaps and silences inherent in all translations, texts, and linguistic constructs readily evidence themselves in Newman's use of French. In the first pages of the text, for example, we read that a single word, combien (how much), constitutes the entire strength of Newman's French vocabulary. The following pages declare that the text lies, for Newman correctly uses terms such as splendide, pas beaucoup, comprenez, and bien sûr. Newman, however, does not understand much more of the Gallic tongue, for when Tom Tristram tells Newman that his age,

thirty-six, "C'est le bel agê," and translates the phrase as "a man shouldn't send away his plate till he has eaten his fill" (p. 28), Newman wonders that the short expression can mean "all that." By the end of Chapter Three, the text announces that Newman has begun to learn French, but there is little evidence of any new knowledge, and in Chapter Four, he naively asks for what we presume to be a literal translation of an idiomatic expression: "The coffee is almighty hot" in the 1879 edition and "The coffee's ripping hot" in the New York revision. M. Nioche's translation is never offered, creating yet another gap in the text. The narrative proceeds to announce a further gap in our knowledge concerning Newman's French performance conceding "I don't know how much French our friend learned; but, as he himself said, if the attempt did him no good, it could at any rate do him no harm" (p. 55). In fact, our only indication that Newman has learned anything comes from Noémie Nioche, who has ulterior motives. She compliments Newman with "You speak French to-day like a charm. My father has done wonders" (p. 60), after Newman has proposed to provide her dowry if she copies several paintings for him. Moreover, we are assured a few pages later that indeed "She was playing a game" (p. 63). Newman misses Valentin's word play on "grosser" when he complains about his tendency toward being overweight, and Newman admits that since he does not understand Valentin, neither his language nor his culture, he "shall lose some very good jokes" (p. 109). He mistranslates "gad-about" as a "very beautiful person" (p. 121), thus complimenting the young Marquise de Bellegarde after her mother-in-law insults her, and the text later insists on Newman's poor French and his inability to communicate with Noémie (p. 133).



He is hardly qualified, then, to translate M. de Bellegarde's death note for Mrs. Bread. In fact, we cannot certify the translation the text offers since we know that "Newman's fierce curiosity forced a meaning from the tremulous signs" (p. 268). The text does not offer the original. Throughout the novel prefers copies: Newman admires the copies in the Louvre more than the originals; Newman claims himself to be unoriginal, a copy; and finally, when Newman presents the Bellegardes with the incriminating evidence, it, too, is a copy. Ultimately, of course, the text, naming intertexts and replicating conventions, is itself a copy. Originals in The American are absent, disseminated into the labyrinth. Little wonder, then, that the Bellegardes, with their linguistic savvy, are not menaced by Newman's threats: they recognize that they really add up to nothing.

The threats end up, with the rest of the text, signaling the void that underlines the multilayered supplements of the novel: the intertexts, the rhetoric, the architecture, the language. Gaps, both graphic, as in the text's rendering of the oath d---d, and thematic (Newman's is "an intensely Western story, and it dealt with enterprises which it will be needless to introduce to the reader in detail" [p. 31]), breach the text, subverting claims to unity. The text ends with intimations of mortality and sounds of silence: Newman burns the incriminating evidence, and Sister Veronica, née Claire de Bellegarde, is cloistered in the Carmelite convent vowing silence.

Claire's destiny in the Rue d'Enfer only reiterates the fate of originality and meaning in The American. Hidden among the thick folds of the Carmelite sisters' garb, and in their new ecclesiastical names,

origins and originality are deferred. Claire's choice to begin a religious quest insists on her need to search for lost origins. Throughout, however, origins, when named, as intertexts, for example, only cast the reader into the labyrinth, for one intertext leads to another which leads to another until, very soon, the reader finds himself chasing differential meaning into the abyss. Originality is likewise deferred in the textual structure of the already-written. Neither the novel, nor Newman, nor the text we read of the incriminating note written by Monsieur de Bellegarde on his deathbed is an original. Everything in the text, as a result of the behavior of language, is, like one of Noémie's efforts, a copy, a metaphor of the infinitely deferred origin.

The text is The American, and the American is Christopher Newman, clearly an intertextual construct: he is a man with a plot in his head (p. 307), a linguistic construct within a linguistic construct. His "personal texture was too loose to admit of stiffening" (p. 70), and similarly his text, The American reveals holes in the weave. He is not really a "new man": like his text, he is already-written. The only "reality" they represent is that of textuality, which, as a result of dissemination, affirms endless substitution. The deconstructive mechanism thus in place, we can see how the text deconstructs itself. Such deconstruction, however, does not destroy the text, for, as J. Hillis Miller observes,

insofar as "deconstruction" names the use of rhetorical, etymological, or figurative analysis to demystify the mystification of literary and philosophical language, this form of criticism is not outside but within. . . . Far from reducing the text back to detached fragments, it inevitably constructs again in a different form what it deconstructs.<sup>41</sup>

In deconstructing the "original," "unified," and "realistic" surface of The American, we have replaced it with a bricolage of many strata of already-written, self-subverting language, all of which lead, inevitably into the abyeme.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Charles Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby (New York: P. F. Collier, 1911), I, 208.

<sup>2</sup>T. S. Perry, "James's American," cited in Henry James, The American, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 391-92.

<sup>3</sup>Anonymous, "The American Novel--With Samples," cited in Henry James, The American, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 407.

<sup>4</sup>See Oscar Cargill, The Novels of Henry James (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 49-50, for a summary of the French critical reception to The American.

<sup>5</sup>James W. Tuttleton, "Rereading The American: A Century Since," The Henry James Review, 1, No. 2 (1980), 141.

<sup>6</sup>Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup>Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup>Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 259.

<sup>9</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Positions," Diacritics, 3, No. 1 (1973), p. 41.

<sup>10</sup>Anonymous, "Current Literature," cited in Henry James, The American, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 394.

<sup>11</sup>Anonymous, "Recent Fiction," cited in Henry James, The American, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 397.

<sup>12</sup>Cargill, pp. 46-52.

<sup>13</sup>George Knox, "Romance and Fable in James's The American," Anglia, 83, No. 3 (1965), 308-322.

<sup>14</sup>Harold Bloom, A Map of Misreading (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II," The Georgia Review, 30, No. 2 (1976), 334.

<sup>16</sup>Henry James, The American, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 17. I have chosen the 1879 London Macmillan edition of The American as my copy text following the practice of both Leon Edel for the Signet Edition and James W. Tuttleton for the Norton Critical Edition. Parenthetical page references for all quotations from the text follow the pagination of the Norton Critical Edition. My argument is not damaged by using the New York Edition, however, since, if anything, the revised edition is more textual. As Royal A. Gettmann, "Henry James's Revision of The American," American Literature, 16, No. 4 (1945), 285, notes, in the revised edition descriptions are more figured and the grammar more complex.

<sup>17</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," The Georgia Review, 30, No. 1 (1976), 11.

<sup>18</sup>Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," 13.

<sup>19</sup>Ann Jefferson, The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), p. 195, citing Lucien Dällenbach, Le récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 65-74.

<sup>20</sup>Jefferson, p. 194, citing Jean Ricardou, Problèmes du nouveau roman (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 182.

<sup>21</sup>Tuttleton, "Rereading The American," 143.

<sup>22</sup>Jean Ricardou, Pour une théorie du nouveau roman (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 162.

<sup>23</sup>Tuttleton, "Rereading The American," p. 146.

<sup>24</sup>Tuttleton, "Rereading The American," p. 144.

<sup>25</sup>Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 9.

<sup>26</sup>Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 251.

<sup>27</sup>Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. 144.

<sup>28</sup>Derrida, Of Grammatology, p. 145.

<sup>29</sup>Josué V. Harari, "Critical Factions/Critical Fictions," in Textual Strategies, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 34.

<sup>30</sup>Charles R. Anderson, Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1977), p. 50.

<sup>31</sup>Anderson, p. 53.

<sup>32</sup>Anderson, p. 46.

<sup>33</sup>Tuttleton, "Rereading The American," p. 152.

<sup>34</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, pp. 313-314.

<sup>35</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 316.

<sup>36</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 318.

<sup>37</sup>Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 41.

<sup>38</sup>Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in On Translation, ed. Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), p. 232.

<sup>39</sup>Jakobson, p. 233.

<sup>40</sup>Bayard Quincy Morgan, "Bibliography," in On Translation, ed. Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), p. 273.

<sup>41</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," in Deconstruction and Criticism, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 251.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### HYMENEAL STRUCTURE IN THE SPOILS OF POYNTON

ALEX: You've missed the point completely, Julia:  
There were no tigers. That was the point.

T. S. Eliot, The Cocktail Party, I.i.<sup>1</sup>

About the only issue on which critics of The Spoils of Poynton can agree is that the novel employs the dramatic analogy: James had confirmed his intent to imitate scenic form in several detailed notebook entries. From there, however, consensus disappears. Where Ford Madox Ford finds "the technical high water mark of all James's work," Laurence B. Holland discovers a "form . . . too slight to support the full weight of substance and import which it seeks to accommodate."<sup>2</sup> Fleda Vetch's moral integrity, impugned by some, is championed by others.<sup>3</sup> Critics have even disputed James's donnée by arguing over whether Poynton is actually a magnificent showplace.<sup>4</sup> But the question that Alan H. Roper notes "bids fair to be considered the novel's chief crux," the question that has occasioned some of the most diverse interpretation, is "Why does Poynton burn?"<sup>5</sup> As we would expect, the explanation for the final fire reflects the thematic concerns of each critic. For example, Bradford Booth, in "Henry James and the Economic Motif," reasons that the conflagration demonstrates the folly of materialism, and Carren O. Kaston, who sees Fleda as a character of Emersonian consciousness, understands the destruction of Poynton as "both

consequence and symbol of Fleda's absence from herself."<sup>6</sup> All these critics read the novel as a social fable complete with concluding moral because, at bottom, they assume contingent relationships between signifier and signified and between literature and reality. Mark Krupnick offers a Barthesian corrective to such thinking:

We tend to take for granted that a work of fiction has its being in what it says. But what if what it says, the words it uses, exists only to outline a space, a void, as in Japanese painting? What if the words only circle about an unstated and unnameable core of blankness, and that blankness--rather than the words--is the point. I say "the point" rather than "the meaning" because in such an art we dare not speak about "meaning," there being no kernel of content at the heart of it. The text is like an onion: there is no secret at the center unless we want to regard that absence or emptiness as the text's secret.<sup>7</sup>

If we agree to abandon our search for ultimate "meaning," thus relinquishing our hold on that central presence, we free ourselves to read The Spoils of Poynton as discourse that deconstructs to reveal an absence. Quite literally, in fact, the presence of Poynton self-de(con)-structs, leaving only the text, "the poetry, as it were, of something sensibly gone."<sup>8</sup>

The integrated texture of The Spoils of Poynton quickly begins to unravel once we acknowledge the novel to be an intertextual construct, or, to use Lévi-Strauss' term, a bricolage, rather than an autonomous work. James the father/author recedes into the critical background throwing James the builder into relief. For years critics have investigated those intertexts that are part and parcel of the novel, calling them sources or analogues: Dumas's play La Dame Aux Camélias, Maupassant's short story "En Famille," Balzac's novel Le Curé de Tours,

and Ibsen's drama The Master Builder.<sup>9</sup> Other textual references within The Spoils itself, for example to Don Quixote (Mrs. Gereth's "handsome high-nosed excited face might have been that of Don Quixote tilting at a windmill," [p. 31]) and to popular novels "about gentlemen who on the eve of marriage, winding up the past, had surrendered themselves for the occasion to the influence of a former tie" (p. 66), further deconstruct the integrity of the text, labelling it as already-written.

Some of the most provocative intertexts, however, are James's own: his choice of the Alvin Langdon Coburn photograph that appears as the frontispiece to the New York Edition of The Spoils of Poynton, his Preface to that edition, and his elaborate notebook entries. Together they suggest deconstructive threads, which, when pulled, run the length of the novel. The Coburn photograph appears on the first verso page of the New York Edition. A caption, "Some of the Spoils," appears near the bottom of a thin, transparent piece of onionskin on the recto page, which separates the illustration from the title page. This light membrane is only one of many hymeneal devices to appear in the novel. The hymen is a figure of potential penetration and articulation designating "both the virginal intactness of the distinction between the inside and the outside and the erasing of that distinction through the commingling of self and other."<sup>10</sup> An earlier manifestation of the hymen appears in Coburn's photograph, which depicts what we assume are representative spoils arranged symmetrically around a fireplace: an ironically appropriate scene, given the grand finale of the novel, a fire touched off perhaps by "some rotten chimley." The largest object in the sumptuous, textured scene ornamented by at least three other

texts, two paintings and a likewise highly ornamented and symbolic Oriental fire screen, is a mirror, a type of hymen, which reflects the back of the clock, a symbol, like the mirror, of Derridean différance: difference and deferment.<sup>11</sup> In the mirror we can also detect either another painting or another mirror, in either case, more possibilities for intertextuality within this intertext.

Where the photograph and the onionskin pose the question of the hymen, a question to which the text returns again and again, the Preface introduces further notions of doubling (already suggested in the photography by the symmetry of the chairs, paintings, candelabra, and vases, and by the reflective nature of the mirror), germination, and dissemination. Jacques Derrida notes that the preface can be thought of as a simulacrum of a postface, which would "consist of feigning the final revelation of the meaning or functioning of a given stretch of language."<sup>12</sup> Producing such a simulacrum can be a laborious, unwelcome task. More fruitful, Derrida suggests, is the attempt to play-act the simulacrum:

while pretending to turn around and look backward, one is also in fact starting over again, adding an extra text, complicating the scene, opening up within the labyrinth a supplementary digression, which is also a false mirror that pushes the labyrinth's infinity back forever in mimesis--that is, endless--speculation. It is the textual restance of an operation, which can be neither opposed nor reduced to the so-called "principal" body of a book, to the supposed referent of the postface, nor even to its own semantic tenor.<sup>13</sup>

Like the mirror in Coburn's photograph, the preface is a mirror, which immediately casts the reader into the labyrinth. The preface is also a seed composed of language, which is, in turn, composed of terms, each of which is a germ.<sup>14</sup> Instead of inseminating, these terms/germs/seeds disseminate and proliferate.

Derridean theory prepares us for what we discover in James's Preface to The Spoils of Poynton. In that attending discourse James describes the growth of his novels: "most of the stories straining to shape under my hand have sprung from a single small seed, a seed as minute and windblown as that casual hint for 'The Spoils of Poynton' dropped unwittingly by my neighbour, a mere floating particle in the stream of talk."<sup>15</sup> His terms/germs/seeds are not inseminated or purposefully planted: the adjective "windblown" and "floating" imply, rather, a disseminating process suggested by the neighbor's act of dropping the hint "unwittingly." James continues, emphasizing the disseminating nature of language:

Such is the interesting truth about the stray suggestion, the wandering word, the vague echo, at touch of which the novelist's imagination winces as at the prick of some sharp point: its virtue is all in its needle-like quality, the power to penetrate as finely as possible. The fineness it is that communicates the virus of suggestion, anything more than the minimum of which spoils the operation.<sup>16</sup>

At once we are enmeshed in the web of the novel's structure and of language and writing itself. For it is here, early in the Preface, that we are introduced to the differential word-play about and around which the novel is spun: the plays on "point" and "spoil." Suffice it to say for the time being, that "point," a cognate of "Poynton," has myriad meanings, including those cited by Jacques Lacan in his collection Points and by Derrida via Littré, who notes that pointure is an old synonym of piqure, a printer's term for a small, pointed iron plate used to fix the sheet to be printed on to the tympan.<sup>17</sup> Spoiling denotes the creation of an absence from a presence: the stripping or destruction of goods by violence, a violence implied in the play of the word "point."



The notebooks elucidate what the Preface calls "that casual hint," making The Spoils of Poynton James's most thoroughly preplanned novel. Beginning on December 14, 1893, James begins to consider "a small and ugly matter": the tale of a young Scotsman who inherits, as a result of his father's death, a large home and its valuable furnishings. When he marries and thus takes exclusive control of the estate, he dispossesses his mother, moving her to a small dower-house attached to the property. She, however, refuses to give up her cherished things, and transports them to the cottage. A public row ensues, and the mother's denouncement of the son's legitimacy concludes the "rather sordid and fearfully ugly" situation.<sup>18</sup> James refines the plot, adding names and details in his entries for 13 and 15 May, 11 August, 8 September, and 15 October 1895, and for 13 and 19 February and 30 March 1896. Those later entries highlight what we will see is the essential point--"point" signifying an absolute void, as in the French negative form ne . . . point--rather than meaning of The Spoils of Poynton. In the entry of May 13, 1895, two of the several underlined words are "despoils" and "absence."<sup>19</sup> The latter term appears again, in the February 13, 1896, entry, in boldface, the method the editors of the notebooks have selected to indicate either two, three, or four underlines in James's hand.<sup>20</sup>

The entries also supply added justification for reading the novel as disseminating discourse. First, James's discussion of the practice of writing presents the writer more as the rereader and rewriter of other discourse, in this instance from the disseminating germs of conversation, than as the father who creates by planting the seed. In the notebooks James refers to the growing text as "my little mosaic"; in the

Preface he reiterates the metaphor of piecing together the text.<sup>21</sup> The writer, James insists, "has to borrow his motive, which is certainly half the battle; and this motive is his ground, his site and his foundation. But after that he only lends and gives, only builds and piles high."<sup>22</sup> What the writer does, in fact, is to begin at a false premise. Since, as James admits in the Preface to Roderick Hudson, "relations stop nowhere," to make of a disseminating germ a foundation is illogical. Because that germ or seed has no origin, the writer actually pieces together his mosaic over a void. And, as The Spoils of Poynton grows through the notebooks, from a short story of about 10,000 words to a novel of nearly 70,000, we become increasingly aware of the novel's "supplementary" composition and recall Derrida's strange logic of the supplement:

The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, techné, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function. . . .

But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence.<sup>23</sup>

The notebooks point in yet another way to a blankness at the heart of The Spoils of Poynton. On their way from worksheet to novel, several details and plot turns are lost. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, the editors of James's notebooks, comment that "the number of details which, listed in positive form, were finally treated negatively" typifies James's style. In the notebooks, for example, Fleda writes to Owen saying that she will meet him in London, while in the published

novel, no letter is written: Fleda meets Owen by chance. Whereas in James's notes Fleda swears her love for Owen, in the final version she only tacitly admits it. An original plan for a week of happiness together at Ricks for Fleda and Mrs. Gereth is nowhere evidenced in the novel, and though Fleda prematurely confesses to Mrs. Gereth Owen's "secret" in the sketches, she waits until she no longer has any hope of marrying him in the novel. Matthiessen and Murdock note: "Even the device of the Morning Post is transformed into a negative. Mrs. Gereth watches that paper from day to day to see whether the Brigstocks have set the date for the marriage, but she is lulled into false security by never finding any announcement there."<sup>24</sup>

Together, James's three intertexts, the photograph, the Preface, and the notebooks, suggest that much of the interest of The Spoils of Poynton resides "in-between." In the photograph, the fireplace and the mirror are situated in-between the twin sidechairs, and the mirror between, in one dimension, the ornate frame and the cameo vases, and in another, between the room and its reflection. The Preface names first one center of the novel: "On the face of it the 'things' themselves would form the very centre of such a crisis; these grouped objects, all conscious of their eminence and their price, would enjoy, in any picture of a conflict, the heroic importance."<sup>25</sup> Later, he reiterates: "The real centre, as I say, the citadel of the interest, with the fight waged round it, would have been the felt beauty and value of the prize of battle, the Things, always the splendid Things, placed in the middle light. . . ."<sup>26</sup> At the end of the same paragraph, however, he recants:

The spoils of Poynton were not directly articulate, and though they might have, and constantly did have, wondrous things to say, their message fostered about them a certain hush of cheaper sound--as a consequence of which, in fine, they would have been costly to keep up. In this manner Fleda Vetch, maintainable at less expense--though even she, I make out, less expert in spreading chatter thin than the readers of romance mainly like their heroines to-day--marked her place in my foreground at one ingratiating stroke. She planted herself centrally, and the stroke, as I call it, the demonstration after which she could n't be gainsaid, was the simple act of letting it be seen she had character.<sup>27</sup>

Taking James's final words as fact, most readers see Fleda Vetch as the center of the novel. Michael Egan, however, reads The Spoils as a novel with a "double centre, James's interest having moved from the conflict over the spoils to the conflict in Fleda's mind."<sup>28</sup> A double center is a definitional as well as a geometrical impossibility, however: the fictional "center" of the novel lies at some disseminating point between the two, within the text, actually at a non-center. Derrida's reading of the structuring function of the center is helpful here in understanding why Egan's assessment of the structure of the novel may be more enlightened than others since, in locating the center in two subjects, he really locates it nowhere. In the opening statement of "Structure, Sign, and Play," Derrida explains:

. . . the structurality of structure . . . has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was . . . above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. . . .

Nevertheless, the center also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible. . . . it has always been thought that the center, which is by

definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. . . . The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality . . . the totality has its center elsewhere. . . . The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play . . . [which is] constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game. . . .<sup>29</sup>

To locate the center of The Spoils of Poynton and so full presence either in Fleda or in the "things" arrests one kind of textual play although it initiates another, taking its start from the center of traditional explication. Traditional readings, however, ignore the point of the novel: that full presence is impossible and that absence is the actual condition of all texts, both lived and read.

Even separately both Poynton and Fleda announce themselves as discourse, and in so doing, assert their intertextuality and deny their own central structuring position. Poynton Park is plainly a literary manor house constructed from conventions of other residences, such as Penshurst, Mansfield Park, Wuthering Heights, and even the House of Usher. It is difficult, in fact, to study English literary history without tracing the path of the country house. As Richard Gill remarks in Happy Rural Seat:

One thinks of Sidney at Penshurst or Pope in the gardens at Cirencester, of Byron savoring the gloomy charm of Newstead Abbey or Thackeray enjoying the hospitality of Clevedon, the model for Castlewood in Henry Esmond. One can imagine, too, the command performance of As You Like It at Wilton or of Comus in the now roofless great hall of Ludlow Castle.<sup>30</sup>



Placing James within that tradition, Gill comments on what he calls James's "abiding preoccupation with the English country house," citing his use of the familiar emblem in letters, essays, and notebook sketches, as well as in the fiction.<sup>31</sup> Gill notes, for example, James's assessment of the house in English Hours:

Of all the great things that the English have invented and made part of the credit of the national character, the most perfect, the most characteristic, the only one they have mastered completely in all its details, so that it becomes a compendious illustration of their social genius and their manners, is the well-appointed, well-administered, well-filled country house.<sup>32</sup>

In James, Gill concludes, such houses function in self-subverting ways: both as symbols of alienation and as symbols of communion, from James's first use of the setting in his first published piece, "A Passionate Pilgrim" (1878), to his last, A Sense of the Past (1917).

The house, then, is an intertextual component within the Jamesian canon and each must be read through the filter of the others. Garden-court, for example, the Touchett residence in The Portrait of a Lady, and perhaps the most famous house in James, is described as a complete world unto itself: "The large, low rooms, with brown ceilings and dusky corners, the deep embrasures and curious casements, the quiet light on dark, polished panels, the deep greenness outside, that seemed always peeping in, the sense of well-ordered privacy in the centre of a 'property.'"<sup>33</sup> Haunting these rooms is a ghost, but when Isabel Archer requests to see it, Ralph Touchett declines saying, "I might show it to you, but you 'd never see it. The privilege is n't given to every one: it 's not enviable."<sup>34</sup> Having been managed into a loveless marriage, however, her ideas for a great career having vanished, Isabel finally

sees the ghost. Ralph had told her "that if she should live to suffer enough she might some day see the ghost with which the old house was duly provided."<sup>35</sup>

Furnishings from the world over insist that Poynton, too, is a world complete:

It was all France and Italy with their ages composed to rest. For England you looked out of old windows--it was England that was the wide embrace. While outside, on the low terraces, she contradicted gardeners and refined on nature, Mrs. Gereth left her guest to finger fondly the brasses that Louis Quinze might have thumbed, to sit with Venetian velvets just held in a loving palm, to hang over cases of enamels and pass and repass before cabinets. There were not many pictures--the panels and the stuffs were themselves the picture; and in all the great wainscoted house there was not an inch of pasted paper. (p. 22)

Among her valued possessions representing all the civilized world, Mrs. Gereth also includes Oriental china and a remarkable Maltese cross. Like Gardencourt, Poynton also contains ghosts, unimagined at the beginning but realized at the end. In suggesting the existence of several phantoms at Ricks, Fleda Vetch denies their previous existence at Poynton:

"Somehow there were no ghosts at Poynton," Fleda went on. "That was the only fault."

Mrs. Gereth, considering, appeared to fall in with this fine humour. "Poynton was too splendidly happy."

"Poynton was too splendidly happy," Fleda promptly echoed.

"But it's cured of that now," her companion added.

"Yes, henceforth there'll be a ghost or two."

Mrs. Gereth thought again: she found her young friend suggestive. "Only she won't see them."

"No, 'she' won't see them." (p. 250)

Each residence, then, houses, at least one ghost, a phenomenon treated by Tzvetan Todorov in several essays, including "The Secret of

Narrative." In that essay Todorov proposes that "the Jamesian narrative is always based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause. . . ."

On one hand there is an absence (of the cause, of the essence, of the truth), but this absence determines everything; on the one hand there is a presence (of the quest), which is only the search for an absence. . . . On one hand he deploys all his forces to attain the hidden essence, to reveal the secret object; on the other, he constantly postpones, protects the revelation--until the story's end, if not beyond. The absence of the cause or of the truth is present in the text--indeed, it is the text's logical origin and reason for being. The cause is what, by its absence, brings the text into being. The essential is absent, the absence is essential.<sup>36</sup>

The ghost becomes one manifestation of that absolute cause, and curiously enough, is invariably treated as a presence. "The essence," comments Todorov, "is never present except if it is a ghost, that is, absence par excellence."<sup>37</sup> A ghost, then, is the presence of absence.

Ghosts inevitably appear at Poynton since it represents a desire for full presence: Mrs. Gereth's whole life is "but an effort toward completeness and perfection" (p. 50), toward a full presence in the things, thought by Mrs. Gereth to be "the sum of the world" (p. 24). Poynton Park, however, and the things themselves, are textual and inter-textual, their essence absence, and hence, the haunt of ghosts. When that is realized, when the ghosts are recognized, nothing is left but the denouement, the narrative stopping once the absence/presence is attained: once Isabel sees the ghosts and once Poynton's essence is revealed as an essential absence. Thus, the burning of the Gereth's house is a symbolic repetition of the already demonstrated void at Poynton Park.

The ghosts inhabit the spaces opened in the fabric of the text not only by the intertextuality of the novel The Spoils of Poynton but also by the conspicuous textuality of both Poynton itself and its contents. From the outset Poynton is presented as a textual entity, which has been supplemented into existence by Mrs. Gereth's genius for collecting, and Mrs. Gereth, in turn, is supplemented into presence by her things. The text remarks: "The mind's eye could indeed see Mrs. Gereth only in her thick, coloured air; it took all the light of her treasures to make her concrete and distinct" (p. 146). Poynton is a "complete work of art," "a provocation, an inspiration, the matchless canvas for a picture" (p. 13). To call Poynton a canvas insists on its textual properties, for a canvas, like a text, is woven, a fabrication, a textile, and as such bears a kinship to text, "text" and "textile" having the same root.<sup>38</sup>

Poynton self-reflexively speaks itself as text in other instances. For example, early on we read: "Poynton was the record of a life. It was written in great syllables of colour and form" (p. 22). Indeed, Poynton records Poynton, itself another text, recording its own history. Self-reflexively, too, the book comments on its own process, smack in the middle of the discourse, creating a gap, a moment of text when we ask, "Who speaks?" The fabric is run during a conversation in which Mrs. Gereth tries to convince Fleda to go to stay at her father's: "We have n't had much innocent pleasure since we met, have we?" she asks. And then the textual moment: "But of course that would n't suit our book" (p. 133).

Poynton's "record of a life" is a bricolage assembled by Mrs. Gereth and her "genius for composition." Each treasure is a text unto itself, a model of language, and as a supplement and through its differential character, writes further fictions. Consider Fleda's reaction to a Ricks refurbished with the spoils of Poynton and Mrs. Gereth's response to Fleda's use of language:

. . . she [Fleda] only, from where she stood in the room, called out, one after the other, as if she had had a list before her, the items that in the great house had been scattered and that now, if they had a fault, were too much like a minuet danced on a hearth-rug. She knew them each by every inch of their surface and every charm of their character--knew them by the personal name their distinctive sign or story had given them; and a second time she felt how, against her intention, this uttered knowledge struck her hostess as so much free approval. (p. 73)

Every objet d'art is a story, and in calling out the name of each, Fleda writes, for Mrs. Gereth at least, another fiction. The supplementary nature of the furnishings--their names and each's own fiction--is further insisted upon when Fleda thinks how the text of a Poynton must appear stripped of its supplements: "in the effort to focus the old combinations she saw again nothing but gaps and scars, a vacancy that gathered at moments into something worse" (p. 79).

One biblot in particular acts as a structural homology by repeating the structure of both The Spoils of Poynton and Poynton's spoils. The Maltese cross is, first of all, a fiction: it is not "maltese" at all, and as Oscar Cargill notes, "It is important not to attach any of the symbolism of charity, the chief virtue of the Knights of Malta, nor of the beatitudes for which the eight points of the true Maltese Cross are said to stand, to the cross in this story."<sup>39</sup> The cross is, rather,



"a small but marvellous crucifix of ivory, a masterpiece of delicacy, of expression and of the great Spanish period" (pp. 73-74). Mrs. Gereth had heard of it in Malta, and had found it through what the text calls "an odd and romantic chance" but what sounds like the process of reading or, to be more specific, the formula of Barthes's hermeneutic code: "a clue followed through mazes of secrecy till the treasure was at last unearthed" (p. 74). In the end, however, the cross symbolizes an absence of knowledge: "She [Fleda] said to herself that of what it would symbolise she was content to know nothing more than just what her having it would tell her" (p. 261). It also represents the absence of the consummation of Fleda and Owen's love, Owen offering the gift following his long-delayed marriage to Mona Brigstock. Further, the very shape of the gift insists upon an absence of meaning. As Derrida reminds us, the X (The chiasmus)--a model also of a crucifix--"can be considered a quick thematic diagram of dissemination."<sup>40</sup> And when the Maltese cross, a term/germ/seed, gets disseminated into the text, it produces not meaning, but an excess of meaning, which disguises an underlying absence. Poynton, we recall, is "an impossible place for producing; no art more active than a Buddhistic contemplation could lift its head there" (p. 148). Waterbath, at least, bears Mona, repeatedly called "a product of Waterbath." Finally, of course, at the end, the cross, along with the other spoils, is rendered quite literally absent, burned in the Poynton disaster.

The Spoils of Poynton is thus a drama of presence and absence: its focus on textuality (a similar drama) suggests it, its imagery (the ghosts, the Maltese cross, the other spoils) suggests it, the plot

(the packing and unpacking, the final fire) suggests it. The very names of the property and of the text itself reveal their textuality and the absence underlying it. "Poyn" is, according to the OED, a variant of the obscure verb "poin," meaning to prick or stitch.<sup>41</sup> The text of Poynton, like the Oriental fire screen in Coburn's frontispiece, is pointed; that is, stitched through and through. Beneath the supplementary stitching lies the canvas, that fabric which will unravel. "Point" is, in fact, a term which undoes itself. While the verb "point," as in "needlepoint" or "petitpoint," signifies the elaboration of an ornamental design with stitching, the noun "point" as in "bringing a discussion to a point," has to do with simplification. And indeed, a point is defined as a "minute mark like a prick." In French too, the term point is self-subverting: in the expression point d'ébullition, point marks the moment at which a phenomenon, such as boiling, is achieved; however, the expression point mort denotes the neutral gear in an automobile transmission, that position where nothing happens.<sup>42</sup> The French point is also a mark of punctuation: a spatio-temporal configuration, a present absence, a full void, an end that also signals the impending beginning of the next sentence. A point, then, can mean something--a point in space or time, a small measure, a particular of discourse--or nothing, as in the second element of the French adverbial negation ne . . . point. The name Poynton appears in James's notebook entry of August 4, 1892, near the end of a list of possible names. It is interesting, given the French adverbial meaning of point, to speculate on the relationship of that name with a suggestion of February 22, 1981, for a place name, a name that never reappears in James's oeuvre: Void.

The English "point" derives from the Latin punctum, that which is pricked. In printing, a point is one of the short sharp pins fixed to the tympan of a press so as to perforate the sheet and serve to make register. A point is also a punctuation mark, especially the mark of full juncture. In these ways, too, Poynton, by virtue of its name, declares its own textuality. Yet another definition of "point" further illustrates the specific textual nature of The Spoils of Poynton. Derrida begins his essay "Restitutions of Truth to Size" with the Littre definition of pointure, noting, in addition to the OED definitions, the use of the term by shoemakers and glovers to denote the number of stitches [the size] of a shoe or a pair of gloves.<sup>43</sup> The "point" of shoes is, in fact, a minor issue in the novel: repeatedly Mona is said to have big feet--her patent-leather shoes, appropriately sexual footwear,<sup>44</sup> are said to resemble a man's--while Fleda is said to have small feet: Mrs. Gereth promises "If you're in want of money I've a little I can give you. But I ask no questions--not a question as small as your shoe!" (p. 133). Thus, in at least these two ways, as printers' and cobblers' terms, "point" (and so Poynton) becomes a hymen, a textual paradigm: like the press points separating the paper from the press, like the shoe or glove separating the body from the world.

Critics who locate the "center" of the novel in Poynton Park, then, are sadly missing the point by overlooking the disseminating nature of the place and thus the prevailing absence. The other critics, those in the majority who discover Fleda Vetch at the heart of the novel, are similarly mistaken. As Frank Lentricchia notes in his reading of Derrida: "the center, in so many words, is the creation of the

'force of desire.' In something like an ultimate act of wish-fulfillment, desire attempts to establish the center beyond fictive status as objective reality, the ground of all grounds. . . ."45 Desire itself is, however, yet another supplement for the desired, a present substitute that takes the place of an absence.

The Fleda-centered critics, in acting on their desire, find hers a subject for dispute. Her small feet, feet since ancient times read as a sexual part of the anatomy, might or might not indicate a sluggish libido. More probably they are a manifestation of what we might call the "Cinderella seme" for beauty. There is no arguing, however, that she finds Owen Gereth sexually attractive:

In the country, heated with the chase and splashed with the mire, he had always much reminded her of a picturesque peasant in national costume. This costume . . . was as copious as the wardrobe of an actor; but it never failed of suggestions of the earth and the weather, the hedges and ditches, the beasts and birds. There had been days when he struck her as all potent nature in one pair of boots. It did n't make him now another person that he was delicately dressed, shining and splendid, that he had a higher hat and light gloves with black seams, and an umbrella as fine as a lance, but it made him, she soon decided, really handsomer, and this in turn gave him--for she never could think of him, or indeed of some other things, without the aid of his vocabulary--a tremendous pull. Yes, that was for the moment, as he looked at her, the great fact of their situation--his pull was tremendous. She tried to keep the acknowledgement of it from trembling in her voice. . . . (p. 150)

Fleda's desire is never consummated: thus, her "honor" is unspoiled. Her maidenhead remains intact, pierced neither by Owen nor by one of his "arms of aggression and castigation," among which are at least eighteen rifles and forty whips, not to mention his pointed umbrella. Fleda, like

Poynton itself, is a structural hymen, and, as we read, as the text deconstructs, we, like Mrs. Gereth, can think "of little but things hymeneal" (p. 38).

To understand Fleda's function in The Spoils, we need to consider Derrida's discussion of the hymen:

To repeat: the hymen, the confusion between the present and the nonpresent, along with all the indifference it entails within the whole series of opposites (perception/nonperception, memory/image, memory/desire, etc.) produces the effect of a medium (a medium as element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between the two terms). It is an operation that both sows confusion between opposites and stands between the opposites "at once." What counts here is the between, the in-between-ness of the hymen. The hymen "takes place" in the "inter-," in the spacing between desire and fulfillment, between perpetration and its recollection. But this medium of the entre has nothing to do with a center.<sup>46</sup>

The hymen is a folded structure, a woven (read textual) supplement, wherein terms disseminate. As Derrida says: "Dissemination in the folds of the hymen: that is the 'operation.' Its steps allow for (no) method: no path leads around in a circle toward a first step, nor proceeds from the simple to the complex, nor leads from a beginning to an end."<sup>47</sup> Near the end of his long corrective to Mallarmé criticism in "The Double Session," Derrida begins to wind down his discussion of the hymen by playing with words with which he has been punning throughout.

If--as a folded sail, candid canvas, or leaflet--the hymen always opens up some volume of writing, then it always implies and implicates the pen [plume]. With the range of all its affinities (wing, bird, beak, spear, fan; the form sharpened into an i of all the points: swan, dancer, butterfly, etc.), the quill brings into play that which, within the operation of the hymen, scratches or grafts the writing surface--plies it, applies it, stitches it, pleats it, duplicates it.<sup>48</sup>



In The Spoils Fleda functions as a hymen, a text that takes place between opposites, embroidering and unfolding, not meaning, but point.

On the level of plot, both Mrs. Gereth and Owen employ Fleda as a go-between. Almost simultaneously Mrs. Gereth secures Fleda's promise to help break up the romance between Owen and Mona, and Owen enlists Fleda's aid in convincing his mother to return the spoils to Poynton Park. Beginning with Fleda's role as mediator between mother and son, we can discover an ambassadorial motif in the novel, or, like Laurence B. Holland, note a religious theme, with Fleda serving as savior.<sup>49</sup> Without thematizing, however, we can see that Fleda, by acting as the go-between, literally fulfills a hymeneal function, convincing Mrs. Gereth to return the treasures to Poynton and thus removing the one obstacle to Owen's marriage to Mona.

On a more purely structural level, Fleda serves as a hymen between masculine and feminine forces. Just as she mediates between Owen and his mother, she also stands between structural opposites Poynton and Waterbath and between Ricks and her father's house. Waterbath, the opening setting of the novel, presents a conspicuously feminine residence, as well it might. The Brigstocks, as far as we know, are a family of four women, three daughters and a mother: no mention is made of any men. The "maddening relics of Waterbath" include "little brackets and pink vases" and "family photographs and illuminated texts" (p. 19), stereotypical women's trinkets. Moreover, Mrs. Brigstock declares her bourgeois femaleness by reading magazines that, in catering to a female audience, provide patterns for "grease-catchers," that is, for

antimacassars. Even the images evoked by the name "Waterbath"--"water," that elemental nurturing force, the original mother, and "bath" suggesting the depth of the womb--further endow the place with feminine characteristics.

Poynton, on the contrary, is a particularly masculine place, constructed in the Jacobean style, decorated, in part, with Louis Quinze furnishings. Mrs. Gereth, its chief resident, though a mother, is described in masculine terms as Don Quixote and as "Atlas under his globe" (p. 71). In her male role she fires the missile, the female magazine, at the Brigstocks in a departing shot. The only detailed glimpse we get of any room at Poynton is Owen's: "all tobacco-pots and bootjacks" (p. 59), semes for masculinity. And, as the name Waterbath suggests the female anatomy, Poynton suggests the male.

Richard Gill notes what he sees as the dialectical arrangement of Waterbath and Poynton, thematizes the operation, and locates a synthesis in Ricks:

The first contrast is a perfectly obvious one: Waterbath in all its ugliness and pretentiousness against the resplendent, authentic beauty of Poynton. And on this level, the theme is also obvious enough: tasteless materialism is found wanting by the genuinely superior standards of cultivation it threatens to destroy. But this almost elementary antithesis is complicated by the introduction of Ricks, for the dower house also plays a symbolic role in the moral scheme of the novel. Just as Poynton by its very existence stands as a rebuke to Waterbath, so also does humble Ricks comprise elements needful to the moral life but missing from both the other houses.<sup>50</sup>

One need not take pains to manufacture themes, however: as Derrida says, "such dialectical happiness will never account for a text."<sup>51</sup> Derrida continues:

If there is thus no thematic unity or overall meaning to reappropriate beyond the textual instances, no total message located in some imaginary order, intentionality, or lived experience, then the text is no longer the expression or representation (felicitous or otherwise) of any truth that would come to diffract or assemble itself in the polysemy of literature. It is this hermetic concept of polysemy that must be replaced by dissemination.<sup>52</sup>

This dissemination takes place, of course, within the folds of the supplementary hymen, "that obscure object of desire," in the case of The Spoils, within Fleda Vetch. Derrida comments: "'More' and 'less' are only separated/united by the infinitesimal inconsistency, the next-to-nothing of the hymen."<sup>53</sup> In this text Fleda, as hymen, separates/unites the outside, male Poynton with the inside, female Waterbath: as a Jamesian reflector, a mirror, a type of hymen, she separates/unites Owen, Poynton's offspring, with his near-anagrammatical mate, Mona, Waterbath's product.

In a non-dialectical way, she similarly relates Ricks and her father's house. Ricks, like Waterbath, is described as another Ur-womb. The parlor is said to be "practically a shallow box" (p. 53), and "the entrances to the rooms were like the holes of rabbit-hutches" (p. 54), the homes of those prodigiously reproductive animals. The most distinctive ornaments at Ricks are, however, the twice-mentioned "four iron pots on pedestals, painted white and containing ugly geraniums" (p. 53). The pots repeat the womb image and act as an emblem for Ricks. Never lived in by a male, the place is decidedly female, haunted by the poor maiden aunt with the tender life story, who is fished out of an empty barn, another womb figure.

Ten Raphael Road, West Kensington, Fleda's father's residence in the "flat suburb," is furnished as a male refuge. Having married off his daughter Maggie, Mr. Vetch no longer wishes to provide a home for Fleda, so he keeps his hours and his home to suit himself only. Fleda, compelled by Mrs. Gereth to return home for a time, finds herself alienated from her old environs:

She had in their common sitting-room the company of the objects he was fond of saying he had collected--objects, shabby and battered, of a sort that appealed little to his daughter: old brandy-flasks and matchboxes, old calendars and hand-books, intermixed with an assortment of penwipers and ash-trays, a harvest he had gathered in from penny bazaars. (p. 145)

When the clutter is mentioned again, first the "penwipers and ash-trays" (p. 146) and then the "brandy-flasks and penwipers" (p. 153) are singled out. Although flask, wiper, and ashtray are all traditionally male possessions, the common element in the two phrases, the penwipers, becomes the emblem of Raphael Street as the iron pots represent Ricks. And appropriately enough, since a penwiper implies a pen, a quill, a point, all intensely masculine if not phallic images. Shuttling between Ricks and Raphael Road as she does between Waterbath and Poynton, Fleda is, again, the hymen taking place between the two.

As Fleda folds between Waterbath and Poynton and Ricks and Raphael Road, she also presents a blank, another characteristic of the hymen. In fact, time and time again the word "blank" appears in the text, often in reference to Fleda:<sup>54</sup> "Fleda tried to think of some of the things at Poynton still unappropriated, but her memory was a blank about them" (p. 79); "When the messenger informed them that Mr. Gereth was in the drawing-room the blank 'Oh!' emitted by Fleda was quite as precipitate

as the sound on her hostess's lips" (p. 82); "Fleda looked very blank" (p. 130); "Fleda was too absorbed in her explanation to do anything but take blankly the full cold breath of this" (p. 240). In yet another, more literally textual way, Fleda's hymeneal blankness is demonstrated by Mrs. Gereth's remark that Fleda will be "a bit of furniture," a position Fleda finds she can "conscientiously accept" (p. 245). Noteworthy here is a specialized definition of furniture. As Warren Chappell defines it in A Short History of the Printed Word, "Blank areas in a page or along margins are filled with blocks known as furniture."<sup>55</sup> Within the folds and blankness of Fleda, one may say (as Derrida notes of the hymen) "the very textuality of the text is remarked."<sup>56</sup> The blank of the hymen manifests itself in the margins, along the edge, or as Derrida comments, at the edge of being:

At the edge of being, the medium of the hymen never becomes a mere mediation or work of the negative; it outwits and undoes all ontologies, all philosophemes, all manner of dialectics. It outwits them and--as a cloth, a tissue, a medium again--it envelops them, turns them over, and inscribes them.<sup>57</sup>

As hymen, Fleda functions as a text, whose chief characteristic is another hymeneal/textual construct, her imagination. She is, in fact, an artist, a painter, more precisely. Although we do not see her paint, we do note her embroidering a piece for her sister's wedding gift. Embroidery suggests, of course, a metaphor for textuality and the play of the hymen since the backside of an embroidered cloth mimics the front in a near mirror reflection. In a good piece of work, the fabric standing between the two sides appears not to have been pierced at all. Fleda's imagination separates her from the rest of the characters in the



novel. As Mrs. Gereth comments: "you've a lovely imagination and you're the nicest creature in the world. If you were inane, like most girls--like every one in fact--I'd have insulted you, I'd have outraged you, and then you'd have fled from me in terror" (p. 117). Owen and Mona clearly have no imagination: Owen especially "has no art with his pen." He comes by it or by the lack of it naturally, however, for his mother "had no imagination about anybody's life save on the side she bumped against" (p. 138).

As hymeneal text, Fleda's imagination envelops, turns, and inscribes all manner of dialectics as specified by Derrida's description: "This imagination of Fleda's was a faculty that easily embraced all the heights and depths and extremities of things" (p. 135). It wanders freely, a point to which the text repeatedly returns. At the beginning the text remarks "Fleda Vetch was dressed with an idea, though perhaps not with much else" (p. 5). Her "only treasure" is her "subtle mind." Throughout, Fleda's imagination situates her between fiction and reality, absence and presence, folding her first one way and then the other. For instance, once Fleda falls for Owen, her imagination takes over:

She dodged and dreamed and fabled and trifled away the time. Instead of inventing a remedy or a compromise, instead of preparing a plan by which a scandal might be averted, she gave herself, in her sacred solitude, up to a mere fairy-tale, up to the very taste of the beautiful peace she would have scattered on the air if only something might have been that could never have been. (pp. 44-45)

When she recognizes that Mrs. Gereth will move to Ricks, she is still not satisfied that all will end peacefully and fantasizes an elaborate fiction:

. . . Fleda had an imagination of a drama, of a "great scene," a thing, somehow, of indignity and misery, of wounds inflicted and received, in which indeed, though Mrs. Gereth's presence, with movements and sounds, loomed large to her, Owen remained indistinct and on the whole unaggressive. He would n't be there with a cigarette in his teeth, very handsome and insolently quiet: that was only the way he would be in a novel, across whose interesting page some such figure, as she half-closed her eyes, seemed to her to walk. Fleda harboured rather, and indeed with shame, the confused, pitying vision of Mrs. Gereth with her great scene left in a manner on her hands, Mrs. Gereth missing her effect and having to appear merely hot and injured and in the wrong. (p. 56)

Fleda later re-imagines Owen as a gentleman in a novel and initially fantasizes the parlour maid as "an actress in the drama, . . . herself . . . only a spectator" (p. 82), and herself as "one of those bad women in a play" (p. 177), and again as the mistress of Poynton assigning an abode there to Mrs. Gereth, "the great queen-mother" (p. 146). Even in the scene preceding the final conflagration, Fleda imagines her own return from Poynton that evening "with her trophy under her cloak" (p. 261). In folding the text back and forth--in presenting Owen as a character in a novel, which he is, and in presenting Fleda in her own imagination as a character in a drama, when, in fact, she is just that--Fleda's imagination performs invagination, to use Derrida's term, repeatedly folding the outside of the text into the inside. As hymen, she plays, as she describes in another context, "a double game" (p. 127) in more ways than one.

The very name Fleda Vetch deconstructs the character's hymeneal function in the novel. In the notebooks the girl of imagination is first named Muriel Veetch, and some critics interpret the change to Fleda Vetch as a simple concession to musicality. Alan H. Roper notes,

however, that Fleda is an obviously emblematic name:

"that its significance is double a little thought will . . . make clear, for if it is suggestive of flight in the sense of running away it can also be suggestive of flight in the sense of aspiration. We need only compare the past participle 'fled' with 'fleet'--particularly in its old verbal sense of to fly.<sup>58</sup>

Oscar Cargill works instead with the surname. "Vetch," he notes, is a fodder vine used as a quick-growing cover on poor soil: "it is possible that James thought that a rather barren soil had nourished Fleda's sensibility," he suggests.<sup>59</sup> Curiously, though, not even Roper, who cites connections between The Spoils and the Iliad, has noted that the last four letters of Fleda form a familiar intertextual name, Leda. In Greek myth, of course, Leda bore four children: Castor and Clytemnestra by King Tyndareus of Sparta, and Pollux and Helen, the result of her rape by Zeus, fabled to have come to her in the body of a swan. Leda was a favorite subject of several of the most celebrated painters of the Renaissance, including, incidentally, three of James's particular favorites, Paul Veronese, Correggio, and Michelangelo. The myth of Leda's rape insists upon the importance of the hymen for both that fiction and for history, since one of the offspring of that rape, of the spoiling of Leda's virtue--Helen--altered the course of the world. Interestingly, James's Preface to The Spoils of Poynton mentions Helen, speculating on "the passion, the faculties, the forces their [the furnishings'] beauty would, like that of antique Helen of Troy, set in motion."<sup>60</sup>

A further intertextual connection exists between Leda and Fleda in the form of W. B. Yeats's poem of 1924 "Leda and the Swan" and his accompanying note. Lines nine through eleven foreshadow the Trojan War and the death of Agamemnon, tragic events caused by Leda's daughters:

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
 And Agamemnon dead.<sup>61</sup>

While no one expires in The Spoils, Poynton, its walls, roof, and towers, burns, confusing the myth, James's novel, and Yeats's poem. Yeats's note to the poem suggests further invagination by implicating, in a metaphor, Oscar Cargill's explanation of Fleda's surname. Yeats explains:

I wrote Leda and the Swan because the editor of a political review [George Russell] asked me for a poem. I thought, "After the individualist, demagogic movement, founded by Hobbes and popularized by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries."<sup>62</sup>

If, in playing word games, one does not voice the initial consonant in Fleda's surname, one arrives at "fetch," according to the OED, an obscure form of vetch. The obscure form has myriad implications for the deconstruction of Fleda Vetch by insisting upon her hymeneal function and feature, her imagination. As a verb, "fetch" can mean to fetch and carry, to run backward and forward with news, tales, and the like, a role Fleda fills as mediator. The term can also mean to derive a word etymologically, a process on whose revelations we are speculating at this very minute, as we read.

The many definitions of the noun "fetch" are even more intriguing, since all suggest doubleness, a condition entered into by the hymen (and by the imagination). According to the OED, a fetch is variously defined, in its first substantive definition as: (1) a contrivance, dodge, strategem, trick; (2) an act of tacking; (3) an indrawn breath, a sigh; (4) a decoy bird; (5) a roundabout phrase, a circumlocution.

In its second substantive meaning, it is (6) an apparition, the double, or wraith of a living person. The first and fourth definitions suggest the duplicity to which Fleda admits when she notes that she plays a "double game." The fifth, a rhetorical definition, more pointedly implies the encompassing, embracing function of the hymen, as defined by Derrida, and suggests further its delaying and deferring structure, its process of disseminating terms within its folds. Fleda briefly alludes to her rhetorical function several times in the text but never so overtly as when she tells Mrs. Gereth that she shall convince her to return the treasures to Poynton Park. When Mrs. Gereth asks how Fleda shall convince her, Fleda replies, using beautifully parallel rhetorical structure: "Why, by putting the question well before you; by being so eloquent that I shall persuade you, shall act on you; by making you sorry for having gone so far," she said boldly. "By simply and earnestly asking it of you, in short; and by reminding you at the same time that it's the first thing I ever have so asked" (pp. 121-22). The second and third definitions imply types of hymeneal structures, the sail and the diaphragm. Derrida notes the sail, which plays back and forth with the wind in the tacking process, among "taut, resistant tissues, such as webs and veils: other hymens."<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in the breathing process, the diaphragm plays back and forth with each inhalation and exhalation. Definition six, of course, recalls yet another sort of hymen, that perfect representation of presence and absence: the ghost.

As we have seen, the very names of the "double centers," of the text, Poynton and Fleda Vetch, make ultimately for a dea(r)th of



signification. Meaning gets lost in the hymen, in the in-between, making the novel a fetch, a circumlocution that defies closure. The novel begins with premonitions of dread, a term that expresses a deferential experience. One only dreads that which has not yet occurred: dread is a presence that expresses an absence, a term akin to desire. Fleda's first words in the novel are, in fact, "Isn't it too dreadful?," referring, of course, to the Waterbath decor. Reiterated twice more in the following paragraph, the term is repeated several times more in the ensuing chapters. And, although the word "dreadful" itself does not appear in the concluding chapter, several suggestions of dread do. First, the concluding chapter, which narrates Fleda's receipt of Owen's "signed desire" that she go to Poynton to choose a gift and her arrival at the train station, emphasizes the text's deferential character. The ultimate "conclusion" is delayed again and again, demonstrating the truth of Kenneth Graham's observation that "often there is as much significant waiting in a James novel as in a Chekhov play."<sup>64</sup> Fleda thinks that collecting Owen's gift "was an hour to dream of and watch for; to be patient was to draw out the sweetness" (p. 260). Second, the sound structure of the paragraphs relating the final deferring action, Fleda's trip to Poynton, further recalls the early repetition of the word "dread" and delays the final revelation of the fire. The high concentration of words beginning with the letter "d" reinforces the dread soon to be fulfilled by the revelation of absence. Even before she resolves to leave, Fleda looks "from the doorstep, up and down the dark street." The text continues:

The December dawn was dolorous . . . and the atmosphere of West Kensington . . . was like a dirty old coat that had been bettered by a dirty old brush. . . . Something, in a dire degree . . . had begun to press on her heart: it was the sudden imagination of a disaster. . . . But nothing could happen save a dismayed discovery that . . . the master and mistress of the house had already come back. . . . At last it was already there, though the darkness of the day had deepened. (pp. 262-63)

Fleda's hymeneal purpose throughout has been to delay Owen and Mona's marriage, and just as delay has been the subject of the first paragraph of Chapter One (Mrs. Gereth "should n't be able to wait even till church-time for relief: breakfast was at Waterbath a punctual meal, and she had still nearly an hour on her hands" [p. 3]), so is it the subject of the concluding paragraphs of Chapter Twenty-Two (Fleda, realizing that Poynton is lost, returns with the porter to the waiting room, where she sees a clock: "'Is there an up-train?' 'In seven minutes,'" and then another echo of the beginning, "She covered her face with her hands" (p. 266). Time, in fact, has been deferred since the appearance in the frontispiece of the clock and its reflection in the mirror.

Even the title functions as a fetch, which defers meaning, situating the action of the novel in the hymen between presence and absence. The term "spoil," as we have already noted, signifies the absence of a once-present: spoiling a city, by stripping it of its goods, creates a void where one did not exist. Accordingly, spoiling a woman creates a similar absence. The play of presence and absence is repeated by the proper noun "Poynton," during the novel alternately filled and emptied. "Point," its cognate, punned on throughout the novel (the age of Louis Seize wants "in taste and point"; Mrs. Brigstock speaks "without effectual point"; what Fleda does "required no pointing out"; Owen

is asked "point-blank" whether he loves Fleda), likewise suggests in its many meanings simultaneous presence and absence. Between the two terms of the title, Spoils and Poynton, occurs another hymen of sorts--the word "of"--a preposition, which signals relationship, but serves essentially as a blank, an empty space.

What, then, is the meaning, the theme of The Spoils of Poynton? Philip L. Greene calls the theme "the heroics of concealment," the novel one of "displaced passion."<sup>65</sup> Michael Egan claims in no uncertain terms that "the clash of generations is the theme of The Spoils of Poynton."<sup>66</sup> If we recognize the hymeneal structure of the novel, however, we may dispense with the search for meaning or theme that leads to such disparate and unsatisfactory answers. "The fold, then, and the blank: these will forbid us to seek a theme or an overall meaning in an imaginary, intentional, or lived domain beyond all textual instances," Derrida reminds us.<sup>67</sup> By reading the "double centers," Poynton and Fleda, as hymens, we can recognize The Spoils of Poynton as a sort of lover's discourse, a narrative of desire: Mrs. Gereth's for the perfection of art she finds in Poynton, and Fleda's for Owen's love. Desire, like the hymen, like yet another supplement--the narrative itself--engages in the play of absence and presence; thus, the text shapes itself, like the relationship between Mrs. Gereth and Fleda, "almost wholly on breaches and omissions" (p. 253). What, given the hymeneal construct, is the fate of meaning in The Spoils of Poynton? Disseminated within the folds and blanks, "nothing could be more marked than its absence--an absence that simply spoke volumes" (p. 136).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, The Cocktail Party (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Ford Madox Hueffer, Portraits from Life (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1937), p. 8. Laurence B. Holland, The Expense of Vision (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>Fleda's sympathizers are led by Hueffer, who calls her "the apotheosis of civilization . . . an angel" in Henry James: A Critical Study (London: Octagon, 1918), pp. 34-35. Patrick Quinn, "Morals and Motives in The Spoils of Poynton," The Sewanee Review, 62, No. 4 (1954), 563-577, speaks for Fleda's detractors when he calls her "an agent of destruction."

<sup>4</sup>See the discussion offered by Jule S. Kaufman, "The Spoils of Poynton: In Defense of Fleda Vetch," Arizona Quarterly, 35, No. 4 (1979), 342-56.

<sup>5</sup>Alan H. Roper, "The Moral and Metaphorical Meaning of The Spoils of Poynton," American Literature, 32, No. 2 (1960), 182.

<sup>6</sup>Bradford Booth, "Henry James and the Economic Motif," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 8, No. 2 (1953), 141-150. Carren O. Kaston, "Emersonian Consciousness and The Spoils of Poynton," ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance, 26, No. 99, o.s. (1980), 97.

<sup>7</sup>Mark Krupnick, "Playing with the Silence: Henry James's Poetics of Loss," Forum (University of Houston), 13, No. 3 (1976), p. 37.

<sup>8</sup>Henry James, The Spoils of Poynton (New York: Scribner's, 1908), p. 249. All page references appearing parenthetically within the text are to this edition. Although Fleda Vetch uses this phrase to refer to Ricks, the remark applies equally to Poynton, as Richard Gill has demonstrated in Happy Rural Seat: The English Country House and the Literary Imagination (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), p. 71.

<sup>9</sup>The Dumas analogue is cited by Holland, p. 102; the Maupassant by Oscar Cargill, The Novels of Henry James (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 218-19; the Balzac by Adeline Tintner, "'The Old Things': Balzac's Le Curé de Tours and James's The Spoils of Poynton," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 26, No. 4 (1972), 436-55; and the Ibsen by Michael Egan, Henry James: The Ibsen Years (London: Vision Press, 1972), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup>Barbara Johnson, Introd., Dissemination, by Jacques Derrida (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>11</sup>For an implied comparison between mirror and hymen, see Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), esp. p. 315. Like the hymen, "the mirror takes place . . . as something designed to be broken."

<sup>12</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 27, n. 27.

<sup>13</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 27, n. 27.

<sup>14</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup>Henry James, The Art of the Novel, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner's, 1934), p. 119.

<sup>16</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 119.

<sup>17</sup>In her notes to Dissemination, p. 26, n. 26, Barbara Johnson explains: "Behind the word 'point' lies Lacan's notion of the point de capiton [in upholstery or quilting, a stitch], by which he translates the Greek word lekton, which he is substituting for the Saussurian notion of the 'signified.'" Jacques Derrida, "Restitutions of Truth to Size," trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., Research in Phenomenology (1978), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>Henry James, The Notebooks of Henry James, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (1974; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 136-37.

<sup>19</sup>James, The Notebooks, p. 199.

<sup>20</sup>James, The Notebooks, p. 249.

<sup>21</sup>James, The Notebooks, p. 208.

<sup>22</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup>Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 144-145.

<sup>24</sup>Matthiessen and Murdock, p. 251.

<sup>25</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 123.

<sup>26</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 126.

<sup>27</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 127.

<sup>28</sup>Egan, p. 77.



<sup>29</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278-79.

<sup>30</sup>Gill, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup>Gill, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup>Gill, p. 19.

<sup>33</sup>Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady (New York: Scribner's, 1908), I, 73.

<sup>34</sup>James, The Portrait of a Lady, I, 64.

<sup>35</sup>James, The Portrait of a Lady, II, 418.

<sup>36</sup>Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 145.

<sup>37</sup>Todorov, p. 155.

<sup>38</sup>For the intimate relationship of text to textile, see Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 64.

<sup>39</sup>Cargill, p. 243, no. 46.

<sup>40</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup>I use the English definitions offered by the Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary.

<sup>42</sup>For French definitions, I have consulted the Dictionnaire Le Robert.

<sup>43</sup>Derrida, "Restitutions of Truth to Size," p. 1.

<sup>44</sup>Old wives (and old nuns) have it that patent-leather shoes are indecent since they reflect a young lady's undergarments.

<sup>45</sup>Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 165.

<sup>46</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 212.

<sup>47</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 271.

<sup>48</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, pp. 271-272.

<sup>49</sup>Holland, p. 99.

<sup>50</sup>Gill, p. 64.

<sup>51</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 261.

<sup>52</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 262.

<sup>53</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 262.

<sup>54</sup>Owen, too, is said to be blank on at least four occasions. (See p. 161, where he is said to be blank twice, p. 188, and p. 197.) As heir to the family estate, he, in an earlier era, would have been known as Poynton. His blankness only reinforces the significant absence suggested by the name of his estate.

<sup>55</sup>Warren Chappell, A Short History of the Printed Word (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1970), p. 56.

<sup>56</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 246.

<sup>57</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 215.

<sup>58</sup>Roper, 191-192.

<sup>59</sup>Cargill, p. 241, n. 30.

<sup>60</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 127.

<sup>61</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Leda and the Swan," in The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 134.

<sup>62</sup>See The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, notes to "Leda and the Swan," p. 134, n. 1.

<sup>63</sup>Jacques Derrida, Spurs/Éperons, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 41.

<sup>64</sup>Kenneth Graham, Henry James: The Drama of Fulfilment (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 150-151, n. 13.

<sup>65</sup>Philip L. Greene, "Point of View in The Spoils of Poynton," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 21, No. 4 (1967), 361.

<sup>66</sup>Egan, p. 80.

<sup>67</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 251.

THE WINGS OF METAPHOR IN THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, II.iv.109-115<sup>1</sup>

I certainly do not mean to imply that The Wings of the Dove is either justifiably or unjustifiably ignored. Many critics consider it James's best work, but even they are often puzzled as to why. Our

contact with the heroine, a rarified being dying of a mysterious disease, is sharply limited, as is our sympathy at learning of her death in Venice. James's syntax is frequently difficult to follow. Moreover, the novel refuses to settle on a genre: is it drama, fairy tale, romance? Such a confused response should and does lead us back to the text for answers. What we find is that we are at sea because meaning is suspended and folded into The Wings of the Dove. Because of the play of language, the immediacy, the "presence" most readers have come to expect from a "realistic" novel has been decentered and delayed: our literary competence has betrayed us. Meaning has moved from the center of the text, where we expect to find it, out to the boundaries, the edges, the margins. These, and not what James refers to as his "buried center" in Book Five, are what mark the text and texture of The Wings of the Dove.

Meaning, of course, does not actually migrate from one place, the center, to another, the margin. It never was and never can be fixed. Rather, caught in the play of difference, it forever eludes our grasp. Although we yearn for the "transcendental signified," some sort of ultimate, stable meaning, it too is a fiction. John Carlos Rowe explains that, given the nature of the novel, attempts to fix meaning are tantamount to conspiracy:

The signs constituting the text are the only reality of the work. To transcend the world of the novel is simply to escape its confines and substitute another system of related signs for its meaning. . . . If a novel dramatizes its essential fictionality, as The Wings of the Dove repeatedly does, then the attempt to determine final meaning is a violation of the work's aesthetic integrity.<sup>4</sup>

In recognizing the impossibility of recovering meaning fixed at some originary moment or site, we agree to the decentering of a text. By "decentering" I mean cancelling and nullifying the concept of origin. In a decentered system, the transcendental signified, that is the ultimate meaning recognized by a logocentric metaphysics of presence, is, according to Jacques Derrida, "never absolutely present outside a system of differences."<sup>5</sup> A favorite metaphor for the center, the origin, the logos, is the father; thus in a decentered system the concept of the privileged father-author is also decentered. Metaphorically, the family tie that binds is cut, and the text is set free.

The Wings of the Dove begins with what may be read as a reverse allegory (since the narrative offers a literal representative of a metaphoric event instead of the other way around) of an occurrence Derrida calls the rupture of the center: Kate Croy returns to her father's house to break with him and with her squalid origins. Although Kate insists that the broken sentence of her family existence end "with a sort of meaning,"<sup>6</sup> that meaning, since her text is effectively "decentered," will be subject to and diffused through the laws of difference.

By allegorically equating the absent father with the absent grammatological origin, however, we apparently fall into a logical bind. For allegory, by traditional standards, is a narrative which continuously refers to another absent structure of events or ideas. The deferred (because not immediate) structure, for example the political story of Queen Elizabeth in Spenser's The Faerie Queene, is considered to be an origin of the allegorical narrative. The traditional view of



allegory, then, requires an effort of mind that flies in the face of deconstruction, since, by its nature, allegory apparently suggests the existence of ultimate meaning. The Wings of the Dove has long been read as just that sort of allegory: Milly, the dove, the suffering Christ figure, converts and redeems the sinful but repentant Densher.

Paul de Man, however, presents a broader vision of the allegorical mode, one that is compatible with deconstructive theory. Allegory, de Man explains, "designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference."<sup>7</sup> In allegory the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous since "the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in all writing the relationship between sign and meaning is allegorical, and so allegory becomes a metaphor of all reading and writing. Using de Man's definition to see The Wings of the Dove as an allegory, we can read the novel as a paradigm of textuality containing several homologous texts which insist upon its paradigmatic character. Both the main text and the embedded ones deconstruct their apparent integrity, first by insisting on their own lack of center, then by revealing the gaps and edges in the textual fabric, and finally by refusing final meaning, and placing it in textual spaces, folds, and margins.

From the very first Kate inhabits a decentered world where meaning is deferred in a number of ways. We see, after all, not Kate, but her mirrored reflection: a graphic representation of difference. Her

representation is both different, in space, from her actual self and deferred in time, if we consider the infinitesimal amount of time that must elapse for a reflection to be perceived. Both the difference and the deferment are reflected by the syntax of the oft-commented opening sentence of the novel, which delays first grammatical and then visual presentation of the subject. Further the opening sentence mimics the differential action of reflection by repetition of feminine pronouns:

She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him."  
(I, 3, my emphasis)

And just as the concept of difference forms the boundary between presence and absence, Kate, in uniting opposites, maintains the distinctions between them: "She had stature without height, grace without motion, presence without mass . . . More 'dressed,' often, with fewer accessories, than other women, or less dressed, should occasion require, with more . . ." (I, 5). Although the presentation of Kate hints at it, by the end of Book First, Chapter One, the rupture Derrida discusses in "Structure, Sign, and Play" is complete: the privileged father in the text has been renounced and the play of difference has taken over.

Fathers, authors, and substitutes for them do, in fact, become powerless in The Wings of the Dove, echoing, in literal terms the decentered origin of the novel's linguistic universe. While Lionel Croy stands renounced, in effect dead for Kate, other fathers and husbands are truly deceased, for example, the Messrs. Condrip, Stringham, and Manningham. Kate's brothers are dead as well, both, in a sense, casualties of death by drowning, an image of ultimate deferment into the

abyss: the first has died of yellow fever contracted at a summer watering place, and the second has drowned while bathing. Milly, of course, is entirely bereft of relations. Other potential father-figures, allegories of origin, are impotent in one way or another. Lord Mark and Merton Densher, for instance, lack the economic goods, "goods" being a Derridean substitute for father, origin, and power, to fully succeed in their social realms. Densher, moreover, is a writer whose "pen" will not produce. Recall that at the end he tells Milly that he has stayed in Venice to write, when, in fact, he is doing no writing whatsoever. Sir Luke Strett, likewise, wields a phallic symbol, the knife, but he, too, is ineffectual in dealing with the uncut volume of Milly Theale.

The opening scene of Kate's renunciation of her origins only begins to hint at a deep narrative instability woven into The Wings of the Dove. Point of view, the traditionally stable fix a piece of writing takes on a subject, shifts continually in the novel, from Kate, to Milly, to Densher. Moreover, from time to time, the point of view is unidentifiable or moves suddenly from a voice inside to one outside the text. At this moment, which Barthes calls a dissolve, control disappears, "leaving a gap which enables the utterance to shift from one point of view to another, without warning: the writing is set up across this tonal instability . . . which makes it a glistening texture of ephemeral origins."<sup>9</sup> Further insisting on the decentered origin of the text is James's own prefatory "despair at the inveterate displacement of his general centre."<sup>10</sup> His middle does not occur at the physical halfway point. Instead, James locates "the whole actual centre

of the work, resting on a misplaced pivot and lodged in Book Fifth."<sup>11</sup> In just such a way, the "center" has decentered, deferred the middle point out toward the wide reaches of the blank margins.

In fact, James never insists on the concept of a center in The Wings of the Dove. In the Preface, he uses three metaphors to describe the composition of the novel, and each comparison deconstructs to reveal in the metaphor and so in the text a space, a gap, or an edge. First, in his discussion of narrative centers, James describes portions of text as "sufficiently solid blocks of wrought material, squared to the sharp edge, as to have weight and mass and carrying power." Then he treats his intention: each block was to have a full presence, "Terms of amplitude, terms of atmosphere, those terms, and those terms only, in which images assert their fulness and roundness, their power to revolve, so that they have sides and backs, parts in the shade as true as parts in the sun."<sup>12</sup> Intended as a blueprint for narrative coherence, James's block method of building text insists, instead, on disjunction, for the blocks do not admit presence. On revision James mourns for them and what they suggest: "the absent values, the palpable voids, the missing links, the mocking shadows, that reflect, taken together, the early bloom of one's good faith."<sup>13</sup> As we will see, our eyes continually focus on the disjunction, on the omnipresent sharp edges and the space, minute though it may be, between the blocks.

Alvin Langdon Coburn's frontispiece to Volume One of The Wings of the Dove illustrates my point. Entitled "The Doctor's Door," the photograph, too, is an artful composition of blocks of many sizes and textures. The door itself is a rectangle embedded with six rectangular

shapes, yet the significant elements on the door, the doorknob, which admits patients, and the number and the nameplate, which identify the residence, exist in the spaces between the blocks. Other blocks alternate with the brick facade of the house to form an unusual arch around the door. Between this arch of blocks and the block pattern forming the door lies another significant marginal area, this a stained or leaded glass window resembling a sunset or a sunrise, both uncertain, borderline times of day. Even the pattern of the pavement is remarkable for the strong contrast created by the light stones and the dark spaces between them. Compositionally these dark gaps point upwards toward the door and its marginal devices.

In addition to employing the architectural metaphor of building a text, like a bridge, with blocks, James likens the composition of his novel to that of a play by noting its combination of picture and scene. Each block of narrative has its own integrity, and in constructing each block, the writer chooses his method of treatment, thus making for consistency, James insists. "In this truth resides the secret of the discriminated occasion--that aspect of the subject which we have our noted choice of treating either as picture or scenically, but which is apt, I think, to show its fullest worth in the Scene."<sup>14</sup> The most evocative textual instance, however, occurs when the boundary, the space between picture and scene is called into question. James revels in such undecidable moments: "Beautiful exceedingly, for that matter, those occasions or parts of an occasion when the boundary line between picture and scene bears a little the weight of the double pressure."<sup>15</sup>



Continuing, James cites "the long passage that forms here before us the opening of Book Fourth" as an example of such a passage where picture and scene impinge on each other exerting pressure on their boundary.

In a short passage within a longer passage, we may note an example of the larger structure to which James refers:

She thrilled, she consciously flushed, and all to turn pale again, with the certitude--it had never been so present--that she should find herself completely involved: the very air of the place, the pitch of the occasion, had for her both so sharp a ring and so deep an undertone. The smallest things, the faces, the hands, the jewels of the women, the sound of words, especially of names, across the table, the shape of the forks, the arrangement of the flowers, the attitude of the servants, the walls of the room, were all touches in a picture and denotements in a play; and they marked for her moreover her alertness of vision. She had never, she might well believe, been in such a state of vibration; her sensibility was almost too sharp for her comfort. . . . (I, 148)

The first sentence of the passage stages a scene of Milly in her typical differential pose, where she incorporates opposites--flushing then paling--not in an effort to resolve their dialectic but simply to maintain them. She notes, for example, in the pitch of the occasion, both "so sharp a ring and so deep an undertone." Immediately following, the next sentence declares itself to be a picture by listing the elements that compose the room and then calling them "all touches in a picture." Leaving the picture, the next sentence picks up on the musical imagery of the earlier sentence, even reiterating the term "sharp," and offers another scene of Milly "in vibration." The word "vibration" furthers the musical image pattern and evokes another nice image of difference in that vibration denotes never-ending movement between opposite poles, more accurately, "a periodic motion of the particles of an elastic body

or medium in alternately opposite directions from the position of equilibrium."<sup>16</sup> Her father-origin, the source of equilibrium, removed, Milly is forever in vibration. Taken as a passage, however, the boundaries are made to bear "a little the weight of the double pressure": the passage works as picture and scene by creating a powerful scene of Milly coming to consciousness within the picture of life at Lancaster Gate. This passage, a miniature of the larger example James offers in the Preface, functions as it does--to bring everything "to a head"--because its functional boundaries call our attention to it.

Boundaries, limits, and margins are also revealed as integral to understanding the third metaphor of composition named in the Preface. James conceives of the form as a medal: Milly's poor health is but half the story: the other half details her effect on those close to her. James's stated intention is to make his medal "hang free, its obverse and its reverse, its face and its back, would beautifully become optional for the spectator." Moreover, he continues, he "wanted them correspondingly embossed, wanted them inscribed and figured with an equal salience."<sup>17</sup> Traditional readers of James note that he does indeed accomplish his purpose: as he says, "The medal did hang free." Companion scenes, for example, proliferate: the party at Lancaster Gate in Volume One is mirrored by the party at Milly's Venetian villa in Volume Two; in Volume One the Bronzino portrait reflects the action, while in Volume Two, Veronese's "Marriage at Cana" provides the template for the narrative; Volume One presents a requisite scene at Marian Condrip's as does Volume Two. Such repetition implies the existence of gaps in the text, holes which necessitate folding and supplementary

stitching to close. Moreover, a medal is bounded by an edge, often distinctly marked with scores called "milling," which separates one side from the other. Such an edge is physically present in the two-volume New York Edition of the novel though it is erased in reprints. By virtue of the edge, we are limited to perceiving one side of a medal at a time.

The metaphor of the medal invites further discussion both in light of Derrida's discussion of metaphor in "White Mythology" and in light of the currents of economic concern coursing through the novel. A medal, given an economic value--and economics are a constant, even a precipitating issue in The Wings of the Dove--becomes a coin. Shifting James's stated emphasis ever so slightly, then, we can read the novel as a coin, and a coin, according to Derrida, is a metaphor for metaphor. As Jonathan Culler explains,

Concrete words have linguistic histories in other concrete uses. These are coins, to use Derrida's metaphor, restamped with some strange device. The question with which we are tantalized (consider that example) is whether or not the original face and obverse can still be detected by some means or other.<sup>18</sup>

"Metaphor," Derrida observes, "has always been defined as the trope of resemblance; not simply between signifier and signified, but between what are already two signs, the one designating the other. This is its most general feature, and the one which justified us in including under this name all the figures called symbolical or analogical. . . ."<sup>19</sup> In this category Derrida includes allegory. Metaphor, regardless of how one defines it more precisely, exists either in the gap between sense and reference or in the space between one meaning and another. The space,

the blank, becomes the empty place, the void in which the reader inserts his meaning in each act of reading. The coin of metaphor is subject to wear and tear, an English rendition of what Derrida calls Usure, a term that subverts itself. First, it means erasure by crumbling, wearing out. It also carries the meaning of usury: "the additional product of a certain capital, the process of exchange which, far from losing the stake, would make that original wealth bear fruit, would increase the return from it in the form of income, of higher interest, of a kind of linguistic surplus value."<sup>20</sup>

In detailing the history of metaphor and the usury to which it is subject, Derrida notes "how insistently the metaphorical process is designated by the paradigm of coinage, of metal--gold and silver," Derrida continues:

Now before metaphor--a phenomenon of language--could be metaphorically designated by an economic phenomenon, it was necessary that interchange between the two "regions" should be orchestrated by a more general analogy. . . . The inscription on a coin is most often the point of crossover,<sup>21</sup> the scene of interchange between linguistics and economics.

Another scene of interchange between linguistics and economics exists in the self-effacing metaphors having to do with linguistic usage. For example, if an expression is frequently heard, we say that it is in circulation or in common currency. A local koiné, a near-homonymic coin, produced by linguistic leveling, describes a local pidgin or dialect.<sup>22</sup> Yet another scene of interchange, we will see, is the poetic text of Milly Theale.

Linguistics, economics, metaphor: the three are invariably linked in Derridean theory and in The Wings of the Dove. And just as

linguistics and economics are related through metaphor, so language and metaphor are linked by economics. First, however, we must understand Derrida's rather narrow use of the term "economy." In her introduction to Derrida's Of Grammatology, Gayatri Spivak offers her definition of the Derridean use: "Economy is a metaphor of energy--where two opposed forces playing against each other constitute the so-called identity of a phenomenon." An economy is a simultaneous occurrence of opposing actions, "not a reconciliation of opposites," Spivak insists, "but rather a maintaining of disjunction." She continues: "Identity constituted by difference is economy."<sup>23</sup> What is revealed by the two faces of the medal that is The Wings of the Dove is just such an economic difference. Identity is constituted in the similar embossing of the two sides of the medal, the companion scenes, the repetition of phraseology, yet this identity exists in the difference, for example, between the evoked Bronzino and Veronese. As the novel is an economy, so is it a metaphor, and thus an allegory.

James's medal metaphor, we begin to realize, is appropriate to the text for more reasons than those of repetition. By introducing the concept of economy, it establishes a framework in which to discuss other economics, which we recognize from our acquaintance with them in other contexts, for example, in Hawthorne and in other Jamesian texts: Europe, America; passive, active; cultured, uncivilized; experience, innocence; age, youth; poor, rich; dark, light. The medal also works as a metaphor for those non-dialectical opposites, which, never reconciled, are disjunctively maintained. As even the most literal reader



understands, resolution is deferred: Milly dies, the lovers split, and Europe and America and everything for which they are economic metaphors, remain separated by the watery abyss.

Thus, from the Preface on, we find ourselves immediately entangled in the differential structure of The Wings of the Dove. Inherent in metaphor, as we have seen, difference is thus also an economic concept. "Since," Derrida writes, "there is no economy without différance, it is the most general structure of economy."<sup>24</sup> Derrida spells difference with an a, différance, to insist upon its twin properties of deferment and differentiation. In one of his most lucid discussions of the subject, Derrida defines his terms:

First, différance refers to the (active and passive) movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving. In this sense différance is not preceded by the originary and the indivisible unity of a present possibility that I could reserve, like an expenditure that I would put off calculatedly or for reasons of economy. What defers presence, on the contrary, is the very basis on which presence is announced or desired in what represents it, its sign, its trace . . .<sup>25</sup>

Since difference and its characteristic temporalization and spatialization is a structural condition of metaphor (and so language and writing), we can say that economy, an aspect of difference, is inherent in allegory, a particular metaphoric structure.

In The Wings of the Dove all of these intimately related issues are at stake: difference (and its functions of differentiation and deferment), metaphor, and economy. Milly and Kate are opposites, different in nearly every way; Milly is at turns a fairy princess, a painting, a dove; and economy, which proves a key to the differences between Kate and Milly, also ultimately delays, as it turns out, the union between Kate

and Densher. Although absent from much of the novel--only two books are narrated from her perspective--Milly is arguably the focus of The Wings of the Dove. Her narrative, in any case, appears at the physical center-point of the novel. She is, moreover, the dove of the title, and most critics designate her as an omnipresent center, a symbol whose influence on those she touches transcends the boundaries of death. She is, many would say, the symbol of the "transcendental signified."

John Carlos Rowe notes the tendency to give Milly central structural significance, but, he observes, "James's symbols are ambiguous texts and remain 'symbolic' only insofar as they resist conventional understanding and require an imaginative act of interpretation."<sup>26</sup> Much has been made by traditional criticism of the religious significance of Milly's sacrifice and her dove-like character to arrive at a final meaning for the novel. Rowe argues, however, that James's use of the myth undercuts the possibility of decisive significance:

The central myth of the novel--the Incarnation, Passion, Crucifixion and Ascension of Christ--is manipulated to destroy any possibility of fulfilled meaning. Milly's association with the dove and the ultimate immanence of the Holy Spirit evokes the ambiguity of the Word diffused in the world by Christ's sacrifice. The novel remains a world unto itself, any meaning beyond it being reduced to silence and void.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, Rowe concludes, the novel leans toward the level of allegory with Milly in her role as "symbol of differences." Her death does not and cannot reconcile irresolvable differences "but simply makes those differences manifest."<sup>28</sup>

Despite his argument with those who label Milly a transcendental signified, Rowe nonetheless locates Milly at the center of the narrative.

How do we reconcile the tripartite structure of both the meaning seekers and the silence finders with the two-sided medal structure devoid of center offered in the Preface? In reality, they are the same structure if we read Milly as an allegorical representation of the difference between one side of the medal and the other and/or as the blank space where a metaphor takes place. In either case Milly represents the empty set, the symbol of disjunction maintained by economy. Indeed, as Rowe notes, Milly is a symbol of differance (I choose Derrida's spelling to insist upon its specialized implications): in human form, a metaphor of text, an allegory of language.

The name Milly Theale suggests a host of textual metaphors appropriate especially to this text. First, the term "mill," in addition to commonly denoting a machine for grinding, is also used for a machine invented by Antoine Brucher in the sixteenth century for stamping coins. As a verb, "to mill" signifies the process of passing cloth, for example, through a fulling mill, to thicken by fulling. Both meanings have textual ramifications. The former recalls the medal of the Preface, that metaphor of differance that names the structure of the text. The latter meaning names the result of metaphoric language: a palpable thickening of the cloth (read text). The last name presents interesting interpretive possibilities. First, the name contains anagrams for "heal" and "health," both terms raised by Milly's unnamed illness. Second, an ambiguity exists in the pronunciation of the surname: are the first two letters pronounced as a dental, as in the French théâtre or as a linguo-dental th as in our theatre? If one chooses the former,

he names a type of small duck, a word with relations, biological, alliterative, and verbal (through the verb "dive"), to dove. We begin to see that our heroine's name, like the medal, has two similarly embossed sides, both of which present metaphors appropriate to the text and self-reflexively refer to the text as text.

Although she is referred to as a fairy princess, the type of American girl, and the image of the Bronzino portrait, the metaphor of dove is used most efficiently to describe Milly. The frontispiece of Volume Two depicting a Venetian palace meant to represent Milly's villa even resembles a baroque dovecote. Among the most frequently cited sentences in the novel is that in which Milly is declared a dove, in the scene where she makes her grand appearance dressed in white at the Venetian palace: "'She's a dove,' Kate went on, 'and one somehow does n't think of doves as bejewelled. Yet they [a string of pearls Milly is wearing] suit her down to the ground'" (II, 218). In this same scene Milly is presented as having taken on "the character of a symbol of differences." Indeed she has: for in this scene more than in any other Milly is presented as embodied poetry, a form that would not exist but for metaphor and difference. First, our attention is called to her pearls, which are said to be especially suited to her. They are appropriate for several reasons. First, pearl, a printing term, names a small size of type, type being an appropriate ornament to Milly's blank page, suggested by her white clothing. Pearls are also a metaphor for writing: the pearl, we know, is formed by a sedimenting process in which differentiated layers envelop each other. The production of a pearl, a textual model, is instigated by an often unseen irritation.

Like Barthes' onion, a pearl, though layered, has no center, for the irritation, the miniscule piece of sand, dissolves in the formation of the jewel. The pearl, then, supplemented into existence, serves to supplement Milly's text.

The dove metaphor further implies the structure of Milly and of the text at large--and vice-versa--as we are reminded by the bird's salient feature: its wings. The grammatically important element in the title of the novel is "wings." "Dove" is relegated to a modifying prepositional phrase. Even Milly's first name with the two "L's" (ailes is French for "wings") names that identifying characteristic of the t(h)eal(e). (Interestingly, too, an "L" forms a right angle, a coin.) The narrative specifically mentions Milly's wings at the most important moment in her life: that is, her death. When Milly dies, Maud Manningham notes: "'Our dear dove then, as Kate calls her, has folded her wonderful wings.'" 'Yes--folded them,'" Densher replies (II, 356). As a biological structure, wings signal difference: mirror images of each other, they are the same, yet different. And, in folding, they imitate the structure of text. In an extensive footnote (he tends to locate important points in the marginal gaps) Derrida makes broadly suggestive intimations of the significance of the metaphor of wings in a critique of Mallarmé's poem "Chastised Clown," a significant intertext for The Wings of the Dove. Herewith, a translated excerpt from the Mallarmé poem:

Her American lake where the Niagara winds,  
The winds have been frothing the sea-grass, which pines:  
"Shall we any more mirror her as in times past?"  
For just as the seagull, o'er waves it has passed,  
Enjoins joyous echoes or drops a wing feather,



She left her sweet mem'ry behind her forever!  
 Of all, what remains here? What can one show?  
 A name! . . .

And Derrida's (and Barbara Johnson's) note:

Wing feather [plume de l'aile] . . . her memory [souvenir d'elle] ["aile" (wing) rhymes with "elle" (she, her).--  
 Trans.] The unfolding of this aviary and of this fan is  
 perhaps infinite. Just to give an Idea of this défi  
d'ailes ["challenge of the wings"; ailles also sounds like  
l's.--Trans.]: there is always a supplementary l. One  
l too few (produces a fall) or one l too many forms the  
 fold, "a spacious writing . . . folds back the too-much-  
 wing" (p. 859) guarantees the flight of the "winged writing"  
 (p. 173), of the "Wing that dictates his verses" (p. 155).  
 The wing, which can be "bleeding" (blank sense) and  
 "featherless" (p. 40), can also at times be held as a  
 quill ("Hold my wing in your hand," (p. 58). . . .<sup>29</sup>

What Derrida does here in his typically playful way is to set into motion a chain of signification and in so doing, allow the text to demonstrate its own deconstruction. As he continues: "These plays (on 'plume,' on 'winds,' etc.)"--and for our purposes, on "wing"--"are anathema to any lexicological summation, any taxonomy of themes, any deciphering of meaning."<sup>30</sup> As a result of the play of Mallarmé's text, however, Derrida does demonstrate some of the textual ramifications of the wing metaphor important for James's narrative as well. For example, Derrida's marginal comments on the wing imply the action of the pen (plume) and the written and folded nature of the text. And if we read James through this Derridean scrim, we begin to see Milly as an encompassing metaphor of text, in all her economic, numismatic, and ornithological aspects.

The narrative names Milly's textual nature repeatedly. She is called "the princess in a conventional tragedy" (I, 120); the wealth that defines her for Kate and Densher "lurked between the leaves of the

uncut but antiquated Tauchnitz volume" (I, 121); money gives poetry to the life Milly clings to (II, 341) she is "food for fiction, food for poetry" (II, 81), a New England heroine (I, 201), and a creature "straight out of a fairy tale" (I, 215). Even James's use of slang and other informal speech is colored by Milly's textual character. Her story, for instance, is grist for Densher's scribbling mill (we catch the pun) (II, 43); and, like Winterbourne in Daisy Miller, Milly is "booked" to be misled (I, 192). Her past is definitively textual: at turns it is called a "New York history, confused as yet but multitudinous" and "a New York legend of affecting, of romantic isolation" (I, 105-106). Both "history," coming down to us as an economy of fact and fiction, from the French histoire, and "legend," are, as Hayden White has demonstrated, narratives subject to the play of language.<sup>31</sup> Milly is thus presented as the fictional product of another fiction, that of her family, a narrative deferred in The Wings of the Dove.

Projected as a textual construct from within the narrative, Milly is very often seen as a derivative intertextual creation as well. Like her pearls, she is the product of a process of sedimentation. Oscar Cargill cites Iseult of medieval romance as Milly's prototype.<sup>32</sup> Biographical critics point to James's beloved cousin, whose initials match Milly Theale's, as the template for the tragic young woman.<sup>33</sup> Contextual-developmental critics point to James's earlier efforts at wealthy but star-crossed heroines like Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer as earlier essays at the heiress of all ages.<sup>34</sup> Some even choose Christopher Newman as the painting beneath the painting; Milly does, in fact, reprise Newman's earlier role as the rich innocent cast into the den

of scheming Europeans, even repeating his scene in the art gallery among the copyists.<sup>35</sup>

While Jamesian and other analogues hint at Milly's textual "origin," her particularly textual consciousness goes further in demonstrating Milly's entanglement with narrative. Very like Isabel Archer, Milly assesses her world through her textual experience, and just as Isabel notes that Lord Warburton is just like an English lord in a novel and then proceeds on her reading of the role, Milly, in a similar manner, tells Mrs. Stringham that Kate is the wondrous London girl of which she has conceived from far back: "conceived from the tales of travellers and the anecdotes of New York, from old porings over Punch and a liberal acquaintance with the fiction of the day" (I, 171). Her sympathy for the Condrips' plight results from her experience with Thackeray and Dickens. Charles Anderson comments that this is one of James's favorite strategies.<sup>36</sup>

This enfolding process, that is, the employment of fictions to illuminate fictions, does not necessarily make for metaphoricity and allegory, though it may suggest their possibilities. Milly's nature and activity must belong to the realm of metaphor to make her a credible vehicle in the allegory I am asserting. The layers of textual references that make for her character, that layer by layer by layer supplement her into existence, reveal at center an emptiness. Like the exquisitely appointed parlor in her London hotel, Milly, too, is a "great garnished void" (II, 256). Her name, Milly, suggests the circular form of a millstone. This shape, in meeting itself in its formation, nullifies its origin and presents an empty inside. Or, like the uncut

Tauchnitz volume, Milly's folding makes much of her text an effective blank. She appears wearing either all black or as on the occasion of the party at her Venetian villa, all white. Charles R. Anderson notes the contradictory implications of Milly's wearing white and the relationship of her festal garb with her daily dress: "White is the most ambiguous of colors: the dress of a bride, the garment of the dead; a symbol of innocence, purity, holiness, and at the same time a symbol of nothingness. . . ." Milly's dress as hostess on her festal evening is the opposite of 'her almost monastic, her hitherto inveterate black.'"<sup>37</sup> The many coded, supplementary meanings of her white dress suggest, in their supplementarity, an underlying void, an absence further insisted upon by "her inveterate black."<sup>38</sup> Although opposites, both black and white are devoid of color and suggest identical if not complementary empty spaces.

As implied by her name and dress, Milly is essentially a blank, a tabula rasa on which everyone is ready to make his own identifying mark. Lord Mark, especially, is eager to impress himself upon Milly. In making her over for himself as the Bronzino portrait, he implies her narrative stature; for a painting shares much with a written text: both depend on underlying blanks, the portrait on an empty canvas, the fiction on a blank sheet of paper; both are supplemented into presence, the portrait by paints, the fiction by words; both may be effaced and repainted or rewritten by more of the same. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida sees writing as similar to painting: "Thus just as painting and writing have faithfulness to the model as their model, the resemblance between painting and writing is precisely resemblance itself: both

operations must aim above all at resembling." The operation, however is impossible to perform, and poetry and painting are far away from the truth. Both are deferred representation, that take place in the void, but in slightly different ways. Painting and sculpture are silent images of silent subjects: silence in these media is normal. But writing is also silent despite the fact that it presents itself as the image of speech. Thus painting, but even more so writing, is estranged from the truth of the thing itself: it is differentiated.<sup>39</sup>

The portrait at hand has been identified as Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi, and now that portrait appears on the cover of the Norton Critical Edition, taking a place alongside "The Doctor's Door" and "The Venetian Palace" as pictorial intertexts for The Wings of the Dove. Several details of the portrait suggest further instances of Milly's metaphoricity as text. First, the green beads, the jewels of the portrait (metamorphosed into Milly's pearls) record the carved legend: Amour dure sans fin. Charles Anderson notes that "No motto could be more exact for the love bestowed on all by Milly."<sup>40</sup> The motto interests me, however, for near rhyme in amour dure, love endures, and the repetition of similar nasals in sans fin, without end. As Derrida comments, rhyme is "the general law of textual effects--is the folding together of an identity and a difference."<sup>41</sup> With Lucrezia holding a book, the portrait further becomes like Milly, a little metaphor of text with the meanings of all the texts diffused in abyssed linguistic play: the Latin text of a hymn to the Virgin printed on the visible page of the book held by Lucrezia, the text of the beads, the text of the portrait, and the text of Milly all become intertextual filters of The Wings of the Dove. Appropriately, Lady Aldershaw looks at Milly



"quite as if Milly had been the Bronzino and the Bronzino only Milly" (I, 223). Indeed, they are the same. Milly's cryptic statement on the occasion of being shown the Bronzino--"I shall never be better than this" (I, 221)--has prompted much critical commentary. Most interpret this insight as Milly's conscious recognition of her impending death. Truly, this interpretation becomes doubly significant if we accept an allegorical reading of Milly and the Bronzino as reflecting twin metaphors of text. For, as Derrida says of both efforts: "The magic of writing and painting is like a cosmetic concealing the dead under the appearance of the living."<sup>42</sup>

Lord Mark is not the only one, however, to engage Milly as a text. Kate, Susan, and Densher write individualized fictions for Milly, thus insisting on her blankness and so her textuality. Their understandings of Milly are based on the readings each is predisposed to find, and so each relationship becomes a sort of paradigm of reader-response criticism. As John Carlos Rowe comments, all the other characters, "make Milly over in their own images."<sup>43</sup> Kate, of course, declares Milly a dove, whose folding wings, in turn declare its function as textual metaphor, as we have seen. Her choice of metaphor, a dove denoting a messenger of peace and deliverance from anxiety, a gentle innocent or loving woman or child, actually says more about herself, for she offers the dove comparison after having presented Milly's relationship with herself and her aunt as one of economic expedience, as a business arrangement to be fraught, undoubtedly, with divisiveness and suffering. Something in Kate's text causes Milly to think that she is "a creature who paced like a panther" (I, 282). My guess is that Milly

reads Kate as a panther first because Kate presents herself as such and second because in describing Milly as a dove Kate is consciously playing off her sense of the differences between herself and the American girl.

Susan Stringham reads Milly as a fairy princess, in accordance with her flair for the romantic and the dramatic. It is through her perspective alone that we see Milly "alone" and "stricken," as the product of "a New York legend of affecting, of romantic isolation." She alone peoples Milly's past with "free-living ancestors, handsome dead cousins, lurid uncles, beautiful vanished aunts" (I, 111): the cast of a popular gothic novel. Milly's plight creates in Susan "and we give it in her own words--the sense of a harrowing pathos" (I, 110). Susan's "reckless connexion with the 'picture papers'" prompts her to describe Milly using romantic hyperbole and exotic references--just the sort of description that would suit the Transcript and her perception of her role as a major contributor:

it was rich, romantic, abysmal, to have, as was evident, thousands and thousands a year, to have youth and intelligence and, if not beauty, at least in equal measure a high dim charming ambiguous oddity, which was even better, and then on top of all to enjoy boundless freedom, the freedom of the wind in the desert--it was unspeakably touching to be so equipped and yet to have been reduced by fortune to little humble-minded mistakes. (I, 110)

And just as Milly registers Kate's perception of herself as predator, she similarly views Susan Stringham as her fairy godmother. On the occasion of the dinner at Lancaster Gate, Milly almost insists on dressing Susan as the fictional guardian: "and it was no fault of the girl's if the good lady had n't now appeared in a peaked hat, a short petticoat and diamond shoe-buckles, brandishing the magic crutch" (I, 145).

Merton Densher, like Susan Stringham, is a writer, but he is a newspaperman rather than a magazine correspondent. He displays his investigative style by drilling Kate for details of her father's crime.

"You don't, you know, really tell me anything. It's so vague that what am I to think but that you may very well be mistaken? What has he done, if no one can name it?"

"He has done everything."

"Oh--everything! Everything's nothing."

"Well then," said Kate, "he has done some particular thing." (I, 68)

The account of his early relationship with Kate sets up his eventual reading of Milly. Kate strikes him, we learn as "just the contemporary London female, highly modern, inevitably battered, honourably free" (I, 56). His view of Kate, his profession, and his insistence, after much traveling in his early years, on "being a Briton," predisposes him to focus on national differences when he is sent by his newspaper to America for fifteen or twenty weeks to write a series of letters "from the strictly social point of view." In America Densher recognizes Milly as a type of American girl, and other young females become, for him, other "Little Miss Theales." "They even went so far as to impose themselves as one of the groups of social phenomena that fell into the scheme of his public letters" (II, 10). Just as she believes herself a dove and a fairy princess and acts accordingly, she likewise begins to refer to herself as the American girl. And, in the same way she reflects Kate's and Susan's self-perceptions, she also reinforces Densher's, as evidenced by her reaction to seeing him in the gallery: "indeed 'the English style' of the gentleman--perhaps by instant contrast to the American--was what had had the arresting power" (I, 292).

In similar ways, then, Kate, Susan, and Densher write characteristic fictions to supplement the blank presented by Milly Theale, fictions that Milly, in turn, reflects. Ruth Yeazell attributes their "telling themselves stories" to "the human need to make such fictions--to channel intense feeling by giving it narrative form."<sup>44</sup> She continues by asserting that "the invention of metaphor becomes for them a means to escape, even to transcend the limits which their world imposes." Yeazell, however, does not consider that Milly acts as a mirror, casting the image of the reader/writer back out to him. The metaphors of dove, princess, and American girl, then, more than demonstrating any "human need," highlight the blankness, the void, underlying the text.

While these metaphors reveal the blank in which they take place, Milly's behavior suggests how metaphor behaves within that space. One of the most frequently commented scenes of the novel presents Milly "seated at her ease" on a slab of rock "at the end of a short promontory or excrescence that merely pointed off to the right at gulfs of air" (I, 123). Such is Milly's precarious "perch," and James is particular to use that term, employing it just the page before in describing the houses toward which Milly is walking as "high-perched." "Perch" is a remarkable word to use here for its myriad implications. First, since "perch" according to the OED is a slang term for "death," it reaffirms the traditional reading that in this scene Milly surveys her possibilities in the face of her impending demise. Second, in suggesting an activity or location associated with birds, the term reasserts the dove metaphor and all the implications suggested by plume (feather/pen) and ails (wings) regarding the writing process. Third, the word suggests

another metaphoric connection with the creation of text since "to perch" means to stretch cloth from a loom, cloth and text being etymological cognates, upon a perch, that is a bar or pair of parallel bars, for the purpose of examining and burling, or detecting and removing imperfections, such as knots and holes. In examining Milly's perch and her role as dove, then, we perch the text of The Wings of the Dove. A perch is, moreover, a bar fixed horizontally on which to hang something; as such it is an agent of suspension, and so a representative and a result of differance.

Thus, we return, once again, via the dove, to the prefatory medal metaphor of the text. The medal, we recall is suspended: it hangs free. "Suspension" is itself an interesting term with pertinent implications for The Wings of the Dove. Its denotations contradict each other: suspension can indicate a disruption, as in the suspension of a service, or it can signal maintenance: the molecular constitution of a solid, for example, can be maintained, or suspended, in solution. "Suspension," thus, directly names the temporal and the spatial aspects of differance and thus becomes an especially appropriate way to describe the location of meaning in the novel. If meaning can be said to be found in Milly, she, we must note, is perched, otherwise suspended. If meaning is in the language of the novel, it too, we must see, is suspended. As Laurence Holland perceptively observes: "The language does not so much stipulate its meanings or describe its action as suspend them."<sup>45</sup> The most recent editors of the novel, J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks, agree: "James's language is designed, not



to treat single and separate phenomena, but to hold in suspension a sweeping multiplicity of references."<sup>46</sup>

These readers' use of the term "suspend" not only reinforces one of the definitions of "perch" as an agent of suspension but also implies in both its temporal and spatial aspects Milly's and so metaphor's fate: the abyss, the great deep, perpetual and infinite deferment. James's use of the term "abyss" is widely remarked. Peter Brooks, in noting the "insistent frequency" of the word in James's writing, comments: "It may be taken to stand for all the evacuated centers of meaning in his fiction that nonetheless animate lives, determine quests for meaning, and which confer on life, particularly on consciousness, the urgency and dramatics of melodrama."<sup>47</sup> Kenneth Graham, in Henry James: The Drama of Fulfilment, similarly discovers meaning to be available in the abyss:

When Milly . . . tells Susie, "I want abysses." it is clear that "abyss" means "complications" and "relationships" of an implicating kind. Of course the idea of death is in the word--it at once reminds Susie of Milly's dangerous perch on a real precipice, and of her illness--but "abyss" is primarily Milly's involvement in life, and not simply a chasm of extinction.<sup>48</sup>

In the scheme of the allegory I propose, however, the abyss Milly contemplates plainly implies the linguistic abyss underlying text and metaphor: the locus for the dissemination of difference. The scene of Milly at the abyss can be seen, then, as iconographic, representing writing, "a movement in itself 'abyssed' as deeps below deeps are revealed under the force of Derridean deconstruction."<sup>49</sup> She is the written--the metaphor of text, in its definitive pose--on the abyeme. As difference, she actually is abyeme, commanding, according to the Yale

critics, the entire field of writing.<sup>50</sup> Susan thinks to present Milly with subtle truth when she tells her "we move in a labyrinth." Milly, however, cheerfully agrees instead of quietly pondering: "'Of course we do. That's just the fun of it.'" said Milly with a strange gaiety. Then she added: 'Don't tell me that--in this for instance--there are not abysses. I want abysses'" (I, 186). She wants abysses because she yearns for life, for within the space provided by the abyss, she may continue to disseminate her text of self, live in death, like a ghost, be an example of text, of presence in absence.

The portrait of Milly at the abyss, like the portrait of the Bronzino, mirrors her role as metaphor of writing, of textuality, and in so mirroring, implies, as mirrors do, death. James's continuing metaphor of Milly as embodied poetry further suggests the complicity of death, for metaphor, which inheres in poetry, always has, as Derrida observes "its own death within it."<sup>51</sup> The argument J. Hillis Miller constructs in "The Critic as Host" resonates in our reading of The Wings of the Dove implying "reasons" for the death of Milly Theale. Miller begins his discussion:

On the one hand, the "obvious or univocal reading" always contains the "deconstructive reading" as a parasite encrypted within itself as part of itself. On the other hand, the "deconstructive" reading can by no means free itself from the metaphysical reading it means to contest. The poem in itself, then, is neither the host nor the parasite but the food they both need, host in another sense, the third element in this particular triangle. Both readings are at the same table together, bound by a strange relation of reciprocal obligation, of gift or food-giving and gift or food-receiving.

The poem, in my figure, is that ambiguous gift, food, host in the sense of victim, sacrifice. It is broken, divided, passed around, consumed by the critics canny and uncanny who are in that odd relation to one another

of host and parasite. Any poem, however, is parasitical in its turn on earlier poems, or it contains earlier poems within itself as enclosed parasites, in another version of the perpetual reversal of parasite and host. If the poem is food and poison for the critics, it must in its turn have eaten. It must have been a cannibal consumer of earlier poems.<sup>52</sup>

Milly, the embodiment of poetry, is, obviously, the food on which the "univocal" and the "deconstructive" readings feed. Literally at turns guest (at Matcham) and host (at the Palazzo Leporelli), she is also, however, host, in the sense of victim and sacrifice, to Kate and Densher's illicit passion; moreover, as we have seen in discussing her place within the larger fabric of James's work, she is "a cannibal consumer of other poems," of Christopher Newman and Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer, for example. Milly, as poem, is thus both victim and victimizer.

Miller's argument continues:

Deconstruction does not provide an escape from nihilism, nor from metaphysics, nor from their uncanny inherence in one another. There is no escape. It does, however, move back and forth within this inherence. It makes the inherence oscillate in such a way that one enters a strange borderland, a frontier region which seems to give the widest glimpse into the other land ("beyond metaphysics"), though this land may not by any means be entered and does not in fact exist for Western man. By this form of interpretation, however, the border zone itself may be made sensible, as quattrocento painting makes the Tuscan air visible in its invisibility.<sup>53</sup>

Allegorically, Milly encounters that "border zone" that deconstruction makes tangible in her perch on the precipice overlooking the abyss. In reaching the edge, she, moreover, commits herself to life in the face of death. Described as "a survivor" (I, 241), Milly is to live and die on the edge, the arête, in the blank, that becomes folded into text.

For this reason Jacques Derrida's essay on Blanchot's "L'arrêt de mort," "Living On: Border Lines," ("Living on" being a translation of the French survivre) seems to offer a valuable index to The Wings of the Dove. In this essay Derrida discusses the self-subverting expression l'arrêt de mort, both a death sentence and a reprieve:

a "text" . . . is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) --all the limits, everything that was to be set up in opposition to writing (speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not, every field of reference--to body or mind, conscious or unconscious, politics, economics, and so forth). Whatever the (demonstrated) necessity of such an overrun, such a dé-bordement, it still will have come as a shock, producing endless efforts to dam up, resist, rebuild the old partitions, to blame what could no longer be thought without confusion, to blame difference as wrongful confusion!<sup>54</sup>

In standing at the edge of the abyss, Milly overruns all the limits assigned to her so far, and so increases her own complexity as text by revealing the abyss. She unabashedly flaunts everything--speech (that which is imitated by "centered" writing), life (by apparently tempting death), the world, the real, history, etc.--represented by Susan Stringham. In appearing at the edge, Milly delimits her text, plunging "meaning" into the abyss below. Such a reading--a deconstruction--a débordement, will no doubt come as a shock, producing other, more standardly acceptable readings, which ignore Milly's differential stance at the edge. In this scene at the arête, Milly is best presented as writing since writing can be defined as "something not completely dead:

a living dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath."<sup>55</sup>

Not only the text presented by Milly Theale but also the text of The Wings of the Dove at large insists on its edges, the empty space bounding one element and another, the site of metaphor, a defining feature of economy and difference. Beginning with the Preface, the text offers words and images that present themselves as edged. For instance, in his discussion of the medal metaphor, James notes: "If, as I had fondly noted, the little world determined for her [Milly] was to 'bristle'--and I delighted in the term!--with meanings, so, by the same token, could I but make my medal hang free."<sup>56</sup> The term "bristle," chosen deliberately, implicates edges in its signification since, according to the OED, the Old Teutonic form of the root syllable is bors-, pointing to Aryan bhers- from the Sanscrit bhrshti-s, meaning point, prong, or edge. In the Preface, the bristle-ability of Milly's world--its edges and their functions--is intimately connected with the operation of the text as medal, as we have noted, a symbol of economic difference. The term "bristle" appears repeatedly in the text, as James's stated delight might imply. And the substitution of the characterization of Susan Stringham as "full of discriminations" with "bristled with discriminations" is one of the few substantive changes between the 1902 and the New York Edition of the novel.

Other edges impinging on Milly are prominent as well. The name Densher, which resonates in its near homonym "indenture," for example, suggests marginal space. For indenture means to indent, or to snip, notch, or jag on the edges. Edges further characterize Densher's



concerns. For instance, when he enters Lancaster Gate for the first time, his attention is focused at the edges: "He had never dreamed of anything so fringed and scalloped, so buttoned and corded, drawn everywhere so tight and curled everywhere so thick" (I, 78-79). Each of the three major settings in the novel--England, the Alps, and Venice--feature edges, each of which opens onto an abyss. An island, England is surrounded by water; the mountain precipices tower over the jagged edges of chasms; and in Venice, even the palaces are built at the water's edge. Images of floating and of water pervade the novel: Kate and Densher are said to be "floating" at least twice, Milly is at turns borne up by a flood, lost in a sea of science, and caught in a current, and Densher and Susie are "at sea." These various watery abysses become visible only from assorted "edges." Kate and Densher walk the edge of social acceptability, Susie of involvement and non-involvement, and Milly, of course, of life and death.

In this way the edge comes to serve as a metonymy of the abyss. For Densher, the fringed, scalloped, buttoned, and corded edges imply a nihilism suggested by the image of the abyss:

These things finally represented for him a portentous negation of his own world of thought--of which, for that matter, in the presence of them, he became as for the first time, hopelessly aware. They revealed it to him by their merciless difference. (I, 79)

Likewise, the many references to water and sea, references etymologically apparent in the word "abyss," suggest edges and metaphors and metonymies of edges. We can point, for example, to an early account of the relationship between Milly and Susie:

The sense was constant for her that their relation might have been afloat, like some island of the south, in a great warm sea that represented, for every conceivable chance, a margin, an outer sphere, of general emotion; and the effect of the occurrence of anything in particular was to make the sea submerge the island, the margin flood the text. (I, 199)

In this way, through the poetic play of metaphor and metonymy, the bounding main (the sea, implied by the edge) dissolves to the binding mind: the tendency, especially in late James, for the book to become a metaphor for the individual and for the landscape of the consciousness. The sea, the abyss, the margin, overwhelms and overtakes the edge of the island/text, swallowing it. Laurence Holland works with the metaphoric book in The Wings of the Dove but sticks closely to a discussion of the social atlas as "conceived both as an integral whole and as a series of discrete pages."<sup>57</sup> Although his points are well taken, he unduly limits his discussion to the specific references to the differences between English and American registries. He does not note that the metaphor of the book both frames and composes The Wings of the Dove.

The metaphor is surely implied often enough: Susie and Densher are both writers, Milly and Kate are both suggested to be "books" in more ways than one. Milly's success in Italy is said to resemble the success of "the last great native novel" (II, 136), and Densher, finding himself back in England after completing his stateside assignment is "once more but a sentence, of a sort, in the general text, the text that, from his momentary street-corner [he, too, we note, is on the edge], showed as a great grey page of print that somehow managed to be crowded without being 'fine'" (II, 11).

Even more than the printed text, however, the margin, the blank at the edge of the page, becomes a metonymy of text, just as wings, the ailles, become the defining feature of the dove, and their folding names her death. The margin is the place at which folding occurs in book-making. Thus, the many significant references to uncut books--Milly carries the Tauchnitz and Kate's uncut pages are mentioned twice--insist upon their margins for purposes of definition: they, Milly and Kate, can have their secrets, Milly her disease, and Kate her father's crimes, because their margins are uncut. I count at least eleven different appearances of the term "margin," a rather specialized word whose frequency cannot help but be marked, especially since, by definition, a margin is the space immediately adjacent to a well, a river, a piece of water; an edge, border, or brink. Milly, for example, has long been conscious "of her unused margin as an American girl--closely indeed as in the English air the text might appear to cover the page" (I, 295). Densher calls his and Kate's secret a margin: "The margin had been his name for it--for the thing that, though it had held out, could bear no shock" (II, 261).

A margin marks the edge. In fact, one definition of "mark" is margin. So, "mark," a sign, a written symbol, curiously comes to replace or supplement a margin, an emptiness, a blank located at the edge. Thus, the margin becomes the scene of writing. In The Wings of the Dove, the Piazza San Marco--Saint Mark's Square, the "center" of Venetian commerce, art, and culture--imitates a margin. As the text notes, it is a "vast empty space." Moreover, if we recall that Saint Mark is the patron saint of Venice, we can more easily recognize the

appropriateness of that city for suggesting metaphors of text. "To write," notes Derrida in Marges de la philosophie, "is to produce a mark which constitutes in its turn a kind of productive mechanism, which my absence will not, as a matter of principle, prevent from functioning and provoking reading, from yielding itself up to reading and rewriting."<sup>58</sup>

The Wings of the Dove marks out other gaps and spaces within its own margins, further abyssing meaning. For example, Milly conceals meaning by folding language back upon itself in a sort of double-speak reply to Mrs. Stringham's query "Are you in trouble--in pain?" Their following repartee not only visually imitates a fan-like folding motion by moving quickly back and forth between the participants, but also suggests the absence of definitive meaning underlying language. Milly replies to Susan's question:

"Not the least little bit. But I sometimes wonder--!"  
 "Yes"--she pressed: "wonder what?"  
 "Well, if I shall have much of it."  
 Mrs. Stringham stared. "Much of what? Not of pain?"  
 "Of everything. Of everything I have."  
 Anxiously again, tenderly, our friend cast about.  
 "You 'have' everything; so that when you say 'much' of it--"  
 "I only mean," the girl broke in, "shall I have it for long? That is if I have got it."

. . . .

"If you've got an ailment?"  
 "If I've got everything," Milly laughed.  
 "Ah that--like almost nobody else."  
 "Then for how long?" (I, 130-131)

The folded, fan-like conversation imitative of text provides a structural homology for the entire novel, which defers meaning in folds, on edges, in margins.<sup>59</sup> The structure of The Wings of the Dove is

architectural, as many before me, including James in his prefatory comments, have observed.<sup>60</sup> The novel I read, however, is one composed of structured spaces rather than of solid blocks. Thus, I find the gaps between rectangle and square in "The Doctor's Door" and the dark spaces of the arcades in "The Venetian Palace" more indicative of the composition of the text than the facades themselves. The structuring gaps of the novel occur at approximately seventeen textual edges marked by an expression containing a form of the copula, to be, a form understood though often omitted in dialects, pidgins, and creoles, a sort of "empty set." Derrida, too, asserts that "is" "is not" in "The Cross-roads of the 'Est,'" a section of his "Dissemination" essay. "Read in the gap, it never comes to be."<sup>61</sup> The copula, he suggests, is the site of dissemination, and so metaphor and writing. So, too, in The Wings of the Dove, where the seventeen edges marked by the copula signal the abyss.<sup>62</sup>

On the first appearance of the expression only a few pages into the novel, Kate and her father use the copula to discuss their abysmal relationship. Lionel Croy explains: "It's just why I've sent for you-- that you may see me as I really am." Kate replies: "Oh, papa, it's long since I've ceased to see you otherwise than as you really are!" (I, 9). A similar scene occurs on the final page, neatly folding the wings of the novel. After Densher promises that he will still marry Kate, a short conversation follows, which, by insisting on the changes that have taken place in their relationship, ultimately defers that relationship forever.



"I'll marry you, mind you, in an hour."

"As we were?"

"As we were."

But she turned to the door, and her headshake was now the end. "We shall never be again as we were!" (II, 405)

Between these two occasions are many others, all of which create edges implicating the differential action of the abyss. For example, after Milly tells Kate of her illness, she says, "So there we are," and the text continues, "There they were then" (I, 229). At one crisis in their affair, Densher asks Kate, "Will you take me just as I am?" (II, 19). As things grow more and more complicated at the Venetian palace, Milly asks Eugenio to get her an hour alone so that, she says, "I may just a little, all by myself, see where I am" (II, 141). In every instance the copula undercuts its own function, to connect. Instead, it interrupts and suggests discontinuity.

The text's recourse to the copula as enigmatic, causing some discussion about our reading of the end of the novel. The phrases suggest, however, more than any meaning, its differential, changing nature since "as we were" is not "as we are." Our reading is disengaged at each of these instances of "there we are," and we respond to the text with the question "where?". We are, of course, along with Milly, on the edge of the abyss.

The abysses, watery and otherwise, only begin to suggest reasons why we cannot fix meaning in The Wings of the Dove. The abyss is the site of metaphor and of difference. Nonetheless, critics desperately try to establish a secure foothold in the novel by casting Milly as Minnie Temple or as Christ and Densher and Kate as pitiable villains. Efforts to "cling to the Rockies" prove fruitless, for the reader

repeatedly finds himself trapped in gaps or gazing into textual chasms, first and most importantly in the personal metaphor of Milly Theale. She is, as the text insists, "a figure to be waited for, named and fitted" (I, 212). A figure--a trope--she is text-metaphor-poetry-difference. The dove with the folded wings inhabits the center of the text thus producing a replica of the abyss she supplements.

Kenneth Graham thinks that in recent readings "the act of writing becomes the protagonist of the fiction it creates; mirror is held up to mirror." He complains: "This is unfair to James, for it makes him out to be almost as dazzling--and as mandarin--as his critics."<sup>63</sup> To my mind, however, such readings reach deep into the text and texture of The Wings of the Dove, suggesting our reasons for the perennial difficulty in pinning down the text. Such readings further suggest why, although we do not get "close" to Milly Theale, she is nevertheless a compelling figure. Her story is affecting because she represents our own textual concerns. James claims himself a poet in the Preface to The Wings of the Dove, and Milly is one of his best poems. In being a dove, she provides a paradigm of the differential activity of metaphor and of language as a whole within a specific though allegorically general textual construct.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, in The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

<sup>2</sup>Anonymous, "Mr. Henry James's New Book," in Henry James, The Wings of the Dove, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 481.

<sup>3</sup>Oscar Cargill, The Novels of Henry James (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 374.

<sup>4</sup>John Carlos Rowe, Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergency of a Modern Consciousness (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 172-173.

<sup>5</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 280.

<sup>6</sup>Henry James, The Wings of the Dove (New York: Scribner's, 1909), I, 6. Hereafter volume and page number will be noted parenthetically within the text.

<sup>7</sup>Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in Interpretation: Theory and Practice, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), p. 191.

<sup>8</sup>de Man, p. 192.

<sup>9</sup>Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 42.

<sup>10</sup>Henry James, The Art of the Novel (New York: Scribner's, 1934), p. 302.

<sup>11</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 306.

<sup>12</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 296.

<sup>13</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 297.

<sup>14</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 300.

<sup>15</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 300.

<sup>16</sup>Although this definition comes from Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, all others were found in the OED.

<sup>17</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 294.

<sup>18</sup>Jonathan Culler, "Commentary," New Literary History, 6, No. 1 (1974), 212.

<sup>19</sup>Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology," trans. F. C. T. Moore, New Literary History, 6, No. 1 (1974), 13.

<sup>20</sup>Derrida, "White Mythology," 7.

<sup>21</sup>Derrida, "White Mythology," 14.

<sup>22</sup>J. L. Dillard, All-American English (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 50.

<sup>23</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Introd., Of Grammatology, by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. xlii.

<sup>24</sup>Jacques Derrida, Positions, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 8.

<sup>25</sup>Derrida, Positions, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup>Rowe, p. 171.

<sup>27</sup>Rowe, p. 172.

<sup>28</sup>Rowe, p. 174.

<sup>29</sup>Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 276.

<sup>30</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 277.

<sup>31</sup>Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in On Narrative, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 1-23.

<sup>32</sup>Cargill, pp. 330-347.

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Lotus Snow, "The Poetry of Mary Temple," The New England Quarterly, 31, No. 3 (1958), 312-339.

<sup>34</sup>See, for example, Ernest Sandeen, "The Wings of the Dove and The Portrait of a Lady: A Study of Henry James's Later Phase," PMLA, 69, No. 5 (1954), 1060-1075.

<sup>35</sup>Elsa Nettles, James and Conrad (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1977), suggests as much in her argument.

<sup>36</sup>Charles Anderson, Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1977), p. 182.

<sup>37</sup>Anderson, p. 212.

<sup>38</sup>For the logic suggesting that supplements imply absence, see Derrida, Of Grammatology, p. 145.

<sup>39</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 137.

<sup>40</sup>Anderson, p. 187.

<sup>41</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 277.

<sup>42</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 142.

<sup>43</sup>Rowe, p. 171.

<sup>44</sup>Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Language and Knowledge in the Late Fiction of Henry James (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 63.

<sup>45</sup>Laurence B. Holland, The Expense of Vision (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), p. 288.

<sup>46</sup>J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks, "Notes on the Text," in The Wings of the Dove, by Henry James (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 413.

<sup>47</sup>Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 173-174.

<sup>48</sup>Kenneth Graham, Henry James: The Drama of Fulfilment (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 183, n. 12.

<sup>49</sup>Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 173.

<sup>50</sup>Lentricchia, p. 173.

<sup>51</sup>Derrida, "White Mythology," 74.

<sup>52</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," in Deconstruction and Criticism, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 224-225.

<sup>53</sup>Miller, p. 231. Note, too, the coincidental appropriateness of the image of a quattrocento painting, that period being among James's favorites.



<sup>54</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines," trans. James Hulbert, in Deconstruction and Criticism, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 84.

<sup>55</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 143.

<sup>56</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 294.

<sup>57</sup>Holland, p. 300.

<sup>58</sup>Jacques Derrida, Marges de la philosophie, cited in Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 132.

<sup>59</sup>For an elaboration of the fan metaphor and its implications for textuality, see Derrida, Dissemination, p. 251.

<sup>60</sup>See, for example, Graham, p. 179.

<sup>61</sup>Derrida, Dissemination, p. 353.

<sup>62</sup>Although I have probably overlooked several instances of James's use of the copula, it appears on the following pages: I, 9 (Kate tells her father that she sees him as he is ); I, 59 (the lovers' desire to keep their meetings "as they were"); I, 97 (the lovers talk of "Our being as we are."); I, 229 (Milly confesses her illness and in finishing says "So there we are."); I, 269 (Milly misreads Aunt Maud's hints at Kate and Densher's relationship and says "Ah there we are!"); II, 19 (Densher asks Kate if she will take him "just as I am."); II, 32 (Maud wants Densher to be, as she says, "exactly as I am."); II, 78 (Milly tells Densher she will not be ill for him, she concludes, "So there you are."); II, 92 (Kate tells Densher that she has told Milly nothing, concluding "So there you are."); II, 123 (Upon getting Susie to admit that Sir Luke works for her, Milly says "Ah there you are!"); II, 128 (Sir Luke tells Milly to go on "as you are."); II, 141 (Milly begs for an hour to "see where I am."); II, 208 (Stuck in Venice, Densher tries to write, but cannot: "So there he was."); II, 209 (Susan and Densher discuss sacrifice and she concludes, "There you are!"); II, 348 (Densher tells Kate: "here I am. It's as I am that you must have me.") II, 379 (Kate confesses that Lord Mark has spoken out. Densher replies, "Ah there you are!"); II, 405 (Densher asks to marry Kate "As we were").

<sup>63</sup>Graham, p. xiii.

CHAPTER SIX  
THE END IS NOT YET

DESDEMONA: O most lame and impotent conclusion.

William Shakespeare, Othello, II.i.159<sup>1</sup>

In Dissemination, Jacques Derrida notes: "A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible."<sup>2</sup> Although we can be sure of little else, we may be certain that the narratives of Henry James--both Prefaces and novels--qualify as texts according to Derrida's definition. Not only do they hide from the first comers (and from the second, third, and fourth comers); in deferring meaning, the texts hide from all comers. That we have sensed since experiencing our first frustrations with James's fine pointing of picture and scene and with his disjunctive syntax.

Until recently, however, we have lacked the methodology with which to explain both our difficulties and our distinct fascination with these elusive texts. Two of the most popular approaches to James, thematic and psychological, treat the narrative as "work" and so, often limit themselves to discussions of content and form. These readings neglect treating the narrative as écriture and so ignore the subversive underside of language. With the development of structuralism and post-structuralism, we now have the concepts to explain why, in the on-going

interpretive game of hide-and-seek, we are always "It." Despite our calls of "ally, ally in free," the Jamesian text continues to hide, its presence continually deferred.

The questions I have sought to canvas in this study are, first, why these texts hide, and, second, how they hide: the devices they use, the textual manifestations of their absence for the reader, the particular manner in which each text absents itself. One of the primary purposes of Chapter One was to explain how a recent shift in certain philosophical thinking has led to our reconceiving our notions of meaning. The shift has been from a tradition of "presence," in which belief in the cogito led to a belief in the original unity of the sign, to a philosophy which, tutored by Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, called into question the presence of consciousness to itself. Similarly, the new philosophy indicted other "presences," such as the concept of origin and the transparency of writing. Under the Western metaphysical tradition, the written word was thought to be a faithful record, a natural reflection of the privileged spoken word, and meaning was understood to be transmitted unaltered by language.

With the advent of Saussurian linguistics, however, the arbitrary relationship between a word and its meaning was recognized and stressed, and the sign was split into the binary opposites of signifier and signified. This opposition, along with others (langue and parole and synchronic and diachronic modes of investigation) became counters in structuralist methodologies. Certain post-Saussurian philosophers, however, particularly Jacques Derrida, while agreeing with Saussure's notion of the arbitrariness of the sign, disputed the structure of

binary oppositions erected by Saussurian linguistics. They replaced the binary oppositions with the concept of différance. Gayatri Spivak notes that "Differance invites us to undo the need for balanced equations, to see if each term in an opposition is not after all an accomplice of the other."<sup>3</sup> Oppositions arrest play by restricting the meaning of a term to a reflection of its binary opposite and by confining the sign to presence. Derrida remarks:

At the point at which the concept of différance, and the chain attached to it, intervenes, all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics (signifier/signified; sensible/intelligible; writing/speech; passivity/activity; etc.)--to the extent that they ultimately refer to the presence of something present . . . become nonpertinent.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of difference, then, language does not and cannot fix meaning. A dynamic system, language constantly defers meaning, often subverting itself in the linguistic sediment.

If we accept the notion of the differential play of language, a concept inherent in, as J. Hillis Miller calls it, a tradition of absence, we can no longer believe that novels, for example, are original works created by privileged father/authors with legal rights to them. Rather, texts become understood as bricolages or as mosaics of other texts, thus nullifying the romantic imperative of originality. Each novel becomes a rereading and a rewriting of ones that preceded it: an intertextual event. The author does not produce the text; rather, the text produces what we know as the writer. Given a system in which we can no longer take language at face value, we cannot believe that literature, the essential manifestation of language, according to Tzvetan Todorov,<sup>5</sup> is transparent, and that meaning is available on the

textual surface. On the contrary, meaning, by virtue of the language in which it must be written, is deferred in the sedimented layers of language.

Thus, the text eludes efforts to fix its meaning because significance is delayed in linguistic play. James seems to recognize that, as I tried to show in my second chapter examining his poetics. I do not suggest that James is a nineteenth-century Derrida or a harbinger of post-structuralism; however, I do insist that Jamesian critical theory can preface what we find in much of Barthes and Derrida. James, for example, in discussing the "seeds" of his work, terms spilled unwittingly by neighbors at dinner parties, suggests their disseminating possibilities. Seeds, he seems to recognize, can be either planted or scattered to the wind. A la Barthes, James refers in several critical texts to the fabric-like character of narrative: the writer, like the weaver, ceases at an arbitrary point since the fabric could continue indefinitely. Moreover, the fabric, however finely woven, contains holes which lure the reader into a labyrinth. Indeed, if a joke be permitted, James's texts, like those interrogated by Barthes, tend to come apart at their seams. James and recent theorists share many ideas concerning the activities of the text, the writer, and the reader. By treating James and Derrida--the Master and le Maître--intertextually, as participants in a conversation, both may speak louder and more clearly.

My discussions of the three novels, The American, The Spoils of Poynton, and The Wings of the Dove, attempted to demonstrate how each



text refers over and over again to its own textuality. Each of the texts offers a library of narrative intertexts from a variety of dramatic, operatic, artistic, poetic, and novelistic contexts. One of James's earlier efforts, The American, insistently provides these intertexts as supplements which assist in weaving the narrative fabric. Countless references to all sorts of other embedded fictions further mark the fictional nature of the novel.

The American provides other devices by which the text announces its absence and its "supplementary" character, such as the symbols of the fan and the statuette of the monk, but its characteristic defining property is intertextuality. James's later productions demonstrate their textuality using more subtle measures. Although they still include Dickensian and Thackerayan intertexts, as in The Wings of the Dove, and refer to the protagonist as "our heroine," these later works, instead of naming the symbol of the fan, imitate the action of a fan, a metaphor of textuality. A fan folds back upon itself, deferring "meaning" into its folds, like a text, whose significance we must chase into the labyrinth. For example, in The Spoils of Poynton, Mrs. Gereth stands waiting on the first page and Fleda waits on the last. Within the text are several other scenes of waiting: Mrs. Gereth's waiting for Owen and Mona's wedding announcement to appear in the papers, Fleda's anticipation of Owen's breaking the engagement, Mona's refusal to marry until the "things" are restored to Poynton Park. In such a way the repeated scenes of waiting, of deferral and delay of meaning--that is, of the perfection of Poynton for Mrs. Gereth and of love for Fleda--imitate the action of a fan. Thus, the story of The Spoils of

Poynton becomes a narrative of the activity of narrative. Similarly, in The Wings of the Dove the text folds back upon itself in the repeated play of the copula. The play on statements by all concerned such as "There we are" and "As we were," statements in which the copula is not completed by a complement, suggests delay within the textual folds.

Not only is the method of self-referentiality refined in the later novels, but the role art plays is made more important and rendered more subtly. While in The American the paintings Newman sees at the Louvre serve simply as narrative intertexts which both name the textual composition of the novel and foreshadow events to come, in the later works, art itself is seen as subversive. For instance, in The Spoils of Poynton, Poynton is a metaphor of art. Not only is it empty during most of the novel, but its absence is made literal at the end by Poynton's destruction. In The Wings, Milly is art incarnate: the Bronzino, embodied poetry. She, like Poynton dies, her textuality, her supplemented presence, realized in her death. Instead of being left with the presence of art, we are presented, as James was upon revising that novel for the New York Edition, with "the absent values, the palpable voids."

Ultimate, fixed meaning is deferred into the folds of each of the three texts by different means. In the early work The American, meaning is deferred in the play between languages, actually lost in translation. Newman is neither reader, nor writer, nor linguist, and once we question his knowledge of the way languages function and his naive belief in the integrity of the sign, we understand why the Bellegardes are not

threatened by his possession of the incriminating note allegedly penned by a dying M. de Bellegarde. In The Spoils of Poynton, meaning, in the form of the completeness of art for Mrs. Gereth and of the fulfillment of love for Fleda Vetch, is deferred in at least two ways. First, Poynton, that symbol of artistic perfection and completeness, undoes itself in the subversive play of the name "Poynton." Second, Fleda, from whose point of view the novel is narrated, acts as a hymeneal text throughout. Structurally a representative of potential penetration (and literally a virgin experiencing sexual love), she stands between masculine and feminine forces: between Poynton and Waterbath, between Poynton and Ricks, between Owen and Mona, and between Owen and his mother. Fleda also acts as the mythic Hymen by eventually eliminating the last obstacle to Owen and Mona's marriage by convincing Mrs. Gereth to return the treasures to the family seat. A hymen is a folded structure, like a fan, and, as Derrida suggests, meaning is deferred within its folds. Likewise, meaning is delayed within Fleda, as her name suggests and as our last glimpse of her, waiting on a train platform, verifies. Finally, in The Wings of the Dove, of course, meaning cannot escape the folds and margins of the abysmal text of Milly Theale. The abyss, in fact, is always the fate of meaning in James, because language cannot stay its own deferment. Little wonder that the word appears in so many contexts throughout the Jamesian oeuvre, as Strother B. Purdy has carefully detailed.<sup>6</sup>

Within the abyss the notion of origin is meaningless. Appropriately, then, representatives of origins are scarce in James.

Christopher Newman, who avowedly prefers copies, has forsaken his land of origin to pursue culture, and more important, a wife, in Europe. Fleda Vetch's father wishes to sever his relations with her while Kate Croy wishes to disentangle her life from her father's. Madame de Cintré's dead father presents a complication for Newman as Owen's dead father does for Mrs. Gereth and Fleda, and Milly's dead father does for Densher and Kate: it is Milly's inherited wealth which has precipitated the lovers' plot.

Origins are repudiated or absented in some way in James, exemplifying his kinship with other American writers. John T. Irwin has recently shown in American Hieroglyphics that questions of origin and writing link the major writers of the American Renaissance. He also poses the question of the subversive equation of death and the abyss, a question which is particularly pertinent for The Wings of the Dove. Irwin ponders: "The abyss is, after all, the endless, the limitless--it is infinity; while death is the absolute limit of human consciousness."<sup>7</sup> James's texts, however, are not of the American Renaissance. Rather, in their historical situation between the classic writings of the Transcendentalists, Dickinson and Whitman, and Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, and the modern works of twentieth-century writers, they form another sedimented layer in the American literary text. Even as an oeuvre, then, James's texts form an edge, a margin, further insisting on their differential character.

In a recent review praising the boldness of Irwin's rereading of the American Renaissance, Gary Lee Stonum voices a concern I share:

Most scholars of American literature have shown an intense hostility to what they still regularly call structuralism. On the other hand, the shock of recognition among other students of American literature has been equally intense. It has seemed to some of us that the roomy folds of post-structuralist thinking especially hold a great and somewhat unexpected promise. What in its native European context avows itself to be the subversive underside of dominant cultural traditions appears strangely central to the American canon. The hope has thus been that these ideas and approaches might supply an interpretive jimmy, one capable of opening the otherwise recalcitrant features of our classic texts.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the hostility of American scholars toward post-structuralism was caused by the esoteric, aesthetic, philosophical--in other words, Continental--bent of the trend. Americans have long distrusted imports, especially, it seems, those from France. The American critical emphasis, thanks in part to William James's pragmatism, has always been on application rather than on abstract theory. Hence the critical and pedagogical success of Brooks and Warren's version of the New Criticism. Post-structuralism, however, has recently begun to come into its own in America since its domestication and application by critics such as J. Hillis Miller. It will, I think, continue to gain support as more readers, in becoming more comfortable with it, apply it to develop new readings, as Miller does to Shelley and Stevens. As Paul B. Armstrong remarked in a review of two recent books on James: "a new generation of James criticism has begun. . . . We must wait and see how much James and the field of literary study benefit from the battle."<sup>9</sup>

In numbering myself among the avant-garde in the battle, I use typical (and traditional) Jamesian battle imagery to assert a radical critical stance. Throughout this study, in fact, I have employed a



similar eclectic approach, at turns mixing structuralist and post-structuralist theories and using them in combination with more traditional thematic and formalistic approaches. My ratio of one brand of criticism to another varies with the text: for example, my reading of The American leans toward structuralism, my discussion of The Spoils of Poynton approaches a playful Miller-esque deconstruction, and the chapter on The Wings of the Dove melds more traditional allegorical criticism with Derridean theory. What then, as I see it, is the relationship between James and post-structuralism, particularly Derrida? As part of the same intertextual network, they often provide useful and engrossing but always provocative commentary on each other, as even the stodgiest of American literature scholars will, I hope, agree.

My applications of recent critical theory and of James's own theory as read through contemporary intertexts to The American, The Spoils of Poynton, and The Wings of the Dove attempt to discover the ways in which the texts, in subverting themselves--their unity, their "reality"--treat their own textuality, and in so doing, indefinitely delay what we have come to understand as "meaning." In the tradition of American literary criticism, I have used theory to further our comprehension and thus, as I see it, our enjoyment of the individual texts. James and the field of literary study cannot fail to benefit from the efforts of such criticism. To paraphrase James's own assessment of what he called "the new novel" of "the younger generation": "The new, or at least the young, criticism is up and doing with the best faith, clearly, and the highest spirits in the world."<sup>10</sup> Likewise,

with the best faith and the highest spirits, I submit this study, in hopes that I have demonstrated some of the potential of the new generation of James critics.

"Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so."<sup>11</sup> In this quotation from the post-written Preface to his first acknowledged novel, Roderick Hudson, James broaches the problem of closure. Endings, he concedes, are really artificial constructs and closure is arbitrary. The word dénouement, we recall, means the unknotting of the complications, but it is also often viewed as the tying up of loose ends. The activity of unknotting produces diverse strands of sense, not organic wholes. Moreover, the very nature of écriture, to defer meaning along a disseminating chain, denies and forbids closure, the assumed purpose of a conclusion. As we saw in Chapter Two, the prefatory endeavor is impossible due to the absence of origins unless we redefine the preface as a simulacrum of the post-face. Similarly, the project of conclusion-writing is subversive: conclusions, given the differential nature of language, cannot conclude. At best, they can provide only simulacra of prefaces to be written. Thus, the problematics of the preface and of the conclusion are opposite sides of a coin, reflections in a mirror, identities with differences, separated only by a hymen of écriture.

James's closing sentence of his Preface to The Portrait of a Lady seems an appropriate prefatory conclusion: "There is really too much to say."<sup>12</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>William Shakespeare, Othello, in The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Introd., Of Grammatology, by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. lix.

<sup>4</sup>Jacques Derrida, Positions, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup>Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 119.

<sup>6</sup>Strother B. Purdy, "Henry James' Abysses: A Semantic Note," English Studies, 51, No. 5 (1970), 424-433.

<sup>7</sup>John T. Irwin, American Hieroglyphics (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), p. 187.

<sup>8</sup>Gary Lee Stonum, "Undoing American Literary History," rev. of American Hieroglyphics, by John Irwin, Diacritics, 11, No. 3 (1981), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>Paul B. Armstrong, "James: The Critical Phases," Novel, 14, No. 1 (1980), 94.

<sup>10</sup>Henry James, "The Younger Generation," in Henry James and H. G. Wells: A Record of their Friendship, their Debate on the Art of Fiction, and their Quarrel, ed. Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray (1958; rpt. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 179. James's exact words are: "The new, or at least the young, novel is up and doing with the best faith, clearly, and the highest spirits in the world."

<sup>11</sup>Henry James, The Art of the Novel, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner's, 1934), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>James, The Art of the Novel, p. 58.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cheryl B. Torsney was born in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1955. She received her education in the Youngstown public schools and at Villa Maria High School, Villa Maria, Pennsylvania. Upon graduating cum laude from Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania, in 1977, with a B.A. in American literature and French language, she and her husband, Jack Torsney, moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she earned an M.A. in English from Louisiana State University in 1979. After receiving the Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, Ms. Torsney will spend a year as a Fulbright lecturer in American literature at the Centre Universitaire de Savoie, Chambéry, France. She will be an Assistant Professor of English at Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi, following her return from abroad.

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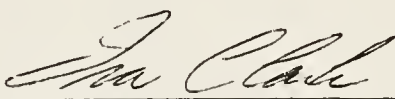
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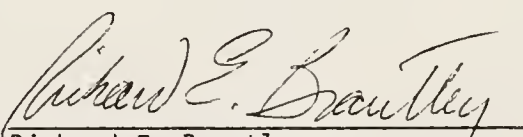
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This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate Council, and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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